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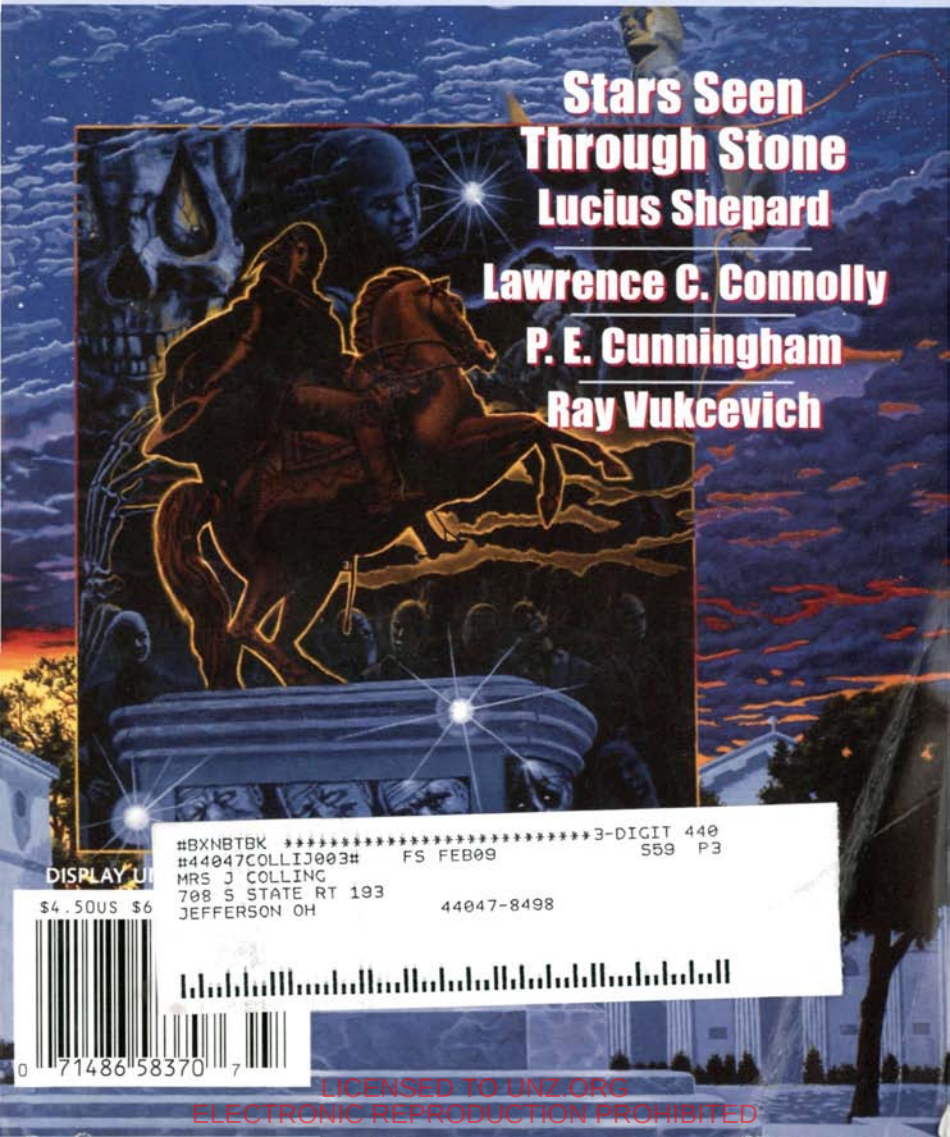

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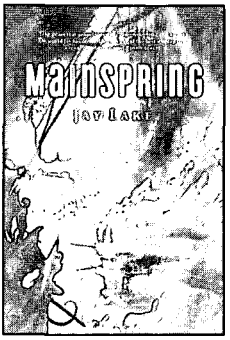

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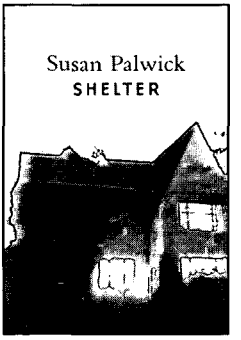

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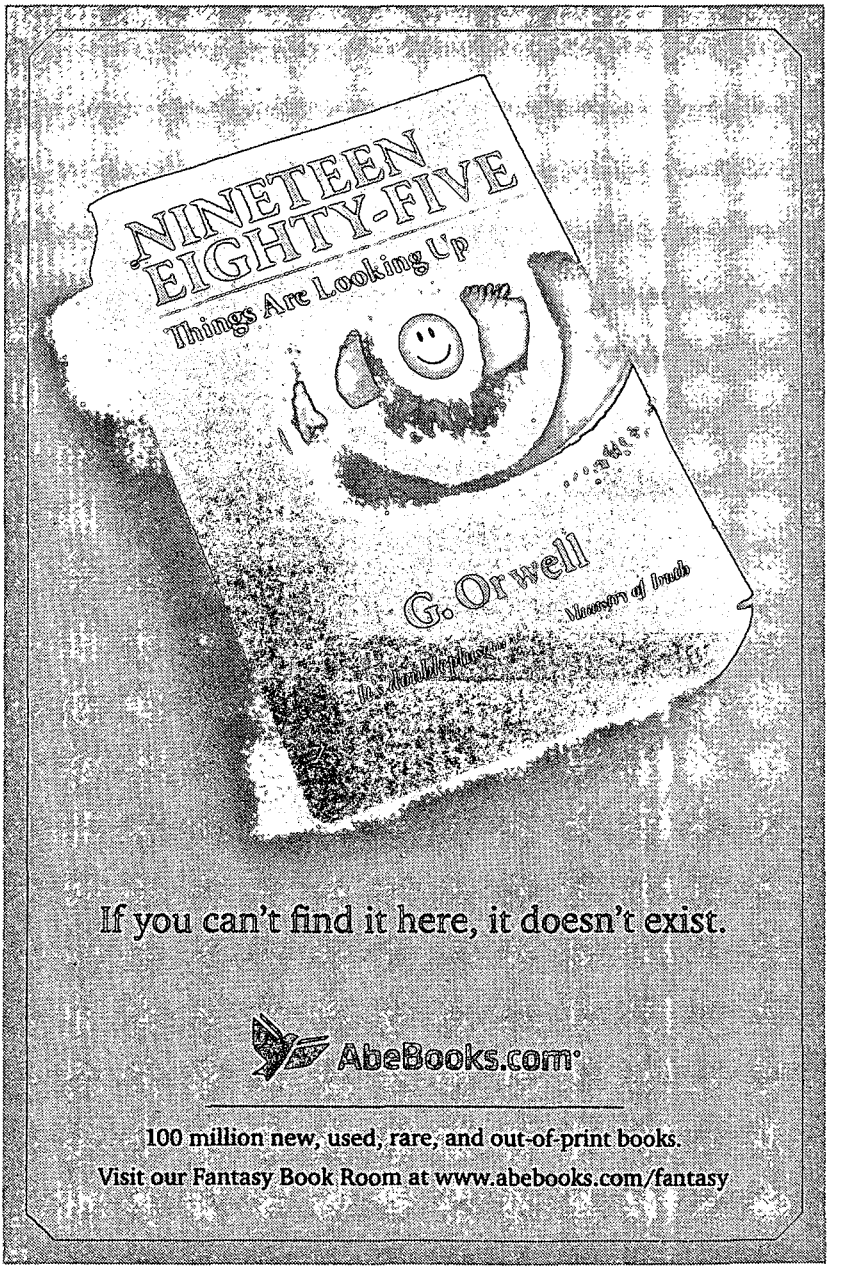

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Lawrence Connolly has contributed several stories to our pages, including "Prime Time!" and "Great Heart Rising." He says recent stories of his are slated to appear in Cemetery Dance *and in an anthology of humorous stories entitled* Bash Down the Door and Slice Open the Bad Guy. *(With that title, let's hope the stories are humorous!) On a more serious note, Mr. Connolly presented a paper entitled "Change Thy Shape: a Metamorphosis of Horror" at ICFA 27 and it has been published online in a new critical journal, Dissections (available at* http://www.simegen.com/writers/dissections/*).*

Mr. Connolly's first novel, Veins, *is currently in the works, with publication tentatively slated for late 2007 or early 2008.*

If these notes give the impression that Mr. Connolly knows his way around the world of horror fiction, then they're accurate...but that's not all he knows. Witness this new work of science fiction—

Daughters of Prime

By Lawrence C. Connolly

"SORRY TO BOTHER YOU, Sister." Alpha's voice rose from implants in Cara's ears, breaking her concentration as she finished calibrating the integration chamber. "We've got a problem."

Cara turned, climbed from the chamber, and stepped out into the long shadows of cliff-side trees. The hatch closed behind her, hissing to an airtight seal. "Go ahead, Alpha." An implant in Cara's hyoid conveyed her voice to a transmitter in the back of her head. From there her words traveled straight up to the mission orbiter. "Break it to me gently."

Despite the 35,000 kilometers that separated orbiter and base, the answer when it came sounded as close as Cara's own thoughts. "The surveillance flier's gone down."

Cara winced as she turned toward a stand of trees that grew along the edge of her cliff-top base. "Tell me what happened." She eased toward the precipice. Below the ridge, a forest canopy extended unbroken toward a plowed field. Beyond the field stood a wall of woven wood and pointed stakes.

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The field lay empty and silent, shadows pooling in the furrows while villagers rested behind the wall. This was their communal hour, a time that Cara usually spent eavesdropping, watching the natives with the help of a tiny drone that could hover undetected above the settlement. But this evening the camp's integrator had required attention, forcing Cara to leave Alpha in charge of monitoring the flier.

"I can't figure it," Alpha said. "It was functioning fine. Take a look."

A window appeared in Cara's cyberoptic field, an ineye projection from corneal implants, powered by cybernetic neurons that ran from the back of her head to the interior of her eyes. The window displayed the drone's last few seconds of visuals: an aerial view of villagers lounging between huts of woven reeds. Everything appeared normal. But then, abruptly, the image pitched: the village slid from view, replaced by a green blur that rose to fill the digital frame. After that, the window vanished.

"So the drone went down in the trees." Cara felt relieved that the flier's arc had carried it away from the village.

"Yes," Alpha said. "It's in the forest. That's the good news." A new window opened, framing an orbital shot of the jungle canopy. Dimmed by distance and atmospheric distortion, the visual lacked the clarity of the flier's image. "It went down here." A circle appeared, highlighting the site.

"Is the homing beacon operating?"

"Yes. For now."

Cara knew she had to retrieve the machine while the natives were at home.

She turned, looking toward the integration chamber, newly calibrated and primed to receive the orbital beams that would transmute the packets of raw matter she had placed within the central kiln. Mission protocol required her to maintain the chamber in a state of readiness, thus allowing for short-notice transmissions of emergency equipment or, in the event that she became incapacitated, the teleportation of a new field observer.

Alpha said. "If you leave now, you'll be back before dark."

Cara checked the sky: deep blue at zenith, golden yellow beyond the village. "All right. I'm going." She walked through the clearing, continuing until she reached the geodesic tent that served as her home. From the front door, she saw the grave of her predecessor, the daughter of Prime

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who had piloted the lander on its one-way flight from the orbiter. "I'd better make a statement."

"Go ahead. Recording."

Following procedure, Cara stated her designation and position: "Cara Gamma. Durgan Outpost." She readied her excursion pack as she spoke, folding her portable rover, lashing it to her shoulder harness. "I'm going to the forest to retrieve a downed flier. Projected off-base time: sixty minutes." She donned the pack and tightened the straps. "Required safeguards are in place. Integrator is primed and calibrated. Alpha will transmit a replacement if I'm out of contact for more than twelve hours. End statement."

Alpha said, "Want a playback?"

"No. Send it. It's fine."

"Sending now."

The statement was a formality, a document for clerics who would one day manage the estate of Prime. Cara did not wait for a reply. The Ministry was over thirty parsecs away. Even if all went well, she would be dead before her words crossed the galactic arm.

CARA DESCENDED the cliff's eastern face, keeping the crag between her and the village until she reached the forest floor. There, enveloped in long shadows and the drone of insects, she removed the rover from its harness and extended the control shaft. Nearby, a cloud of flies swarmed above the carcass of a large slug. The flies ignored her. They hunted by smell, and her scent lacked the chemical triggers that attracted them. Working in peace, she kicked down the rover's pedals, locking them into place on either side of a single gyro-balanced wheel. Then she climbed on, leaned forward, and took off — stirring the swarm with the wind of her passing.

The rover cruised at forty klicks, its proprioception sensors maintaining stability as she leaned forward on the pedals. Gripping the control shaft, she bounded through the forest, over a carpet of brittle vegetation, and up onto the remnant of an ancient road that extended for nearly a kilometer before vanishing back into the forest loam.

Surveys indicated that the road had once connected a string of settlements, all but one of which were now abandoned and overgrown.

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Together, the ruins presented a conundrum that she hoped to understand better before revealing herself to the island's remaining inhabitants.

The jungle thinned as Cara reached a swift-moving stream. Spreading branches rose above her, framing a patch of clear sky as she dismounted at the water's edge. Then, with the rover once again folded against her back, she stepped across a makeshift bridge of stones and emerged onto the far bank.

The flier was close, broadcasting its location from a tangled hollow. She hurried toward it, following the signal into the shadows of a brushwood cove. Then she stopped, recoiling as she saw what waited within.

She wanted to run, but it was too late.

A short figure stood before her, meeting her gaze with nictitating eyes. It was a villager. On his chest, swinging from a neckband of braided reeds, hung a twelve-centimeter disk of carbon fiber and molded plastic. She recognized the pendant. It was her fallen flier.

For a moment, Cara and the creature stood eyeing each other through the shadows: the villager hunching his shoulders in a posture of respect, Cara leaning back, stunned by the realization that her days of detached observation were over.

THIS TIME, it was Cara's turn to voice the alarm. To Alpha, she said: "Sister, we've got a problem."

The creature opened his jaws, silencing her with a loud click. Other sounds followed, shrill warbles from spiracle nostrils, clicks and chirps from a triangular mouth. There was nothing like it in human speech, except perhaps the self-harmonies of Tibetan throat singers or the glottal clicking of the ancient Khoikhoins of South Africa. Nevertheless, after months of eavesdropping, Cara had become familiar with the sounds. Now, standing before the creature, she listened carefully, getting the gist of his words: "*I am Long-Eyes,*" he said. "*You are a* X-ooh. *Sent by* X-ah."

She knew the word *X-ah*, a throaty click followed by a low-vowel sigh, but its meaning could be tricky. Depending on inflection, it could mean either *fate* or *spirit*. The other word, *X-ooh*, was more mysterious. She had heard it before, spoken in reverent whispers. She had assumed it was a deity.

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Long-Eyes stared, waiting.

Alpha said, "You need to answer him."

Cara hesitated.

Alpha sent a prompt, keying it directly into Cara's view. It was a simple greeting, augmented with symbols for alien phonemes: *X* for glottal click, *Ñ* for nasalized whistle.

"Talk to him, Sister!"

Cara gave it her best, wishing she had been endowed with forehead nostrils to fill in the higher sounds: "*Greetings, Long-Eyes. I am* Cara."

Long-Eyes raised his hands, fingers clenched in amazement. "*X-aha.*" He pronounced the *C* as a click, giving the name an intonation similar to *X-ah*.

Alpha said, "I think you just told him you're a *spirit*."

But Long-Eyes seemed more delighted than afraid. He lowered his head, clicking: "*You are* X-aha, *the* X-ooh *from* X-ah!" He bowed lower, removing the braided twine that held the flier to his chest. "*Yours*," he said, handing her the broken drone.

She took it, wondering at his bland acceptance of the tiny machine. He could not have seen it before it fell, and yet he handled it as if he had known about it for some time. "*They fell*," he said, gesturing toward the drone. "*I retrieved them.*"

"*Them*?" She didn't understand. "*You retrieved* them?"

He spoke again, repeating himself, and this time she discerned the subtle inflection that rendered the pronoun singular. This time, she understood. He had said *it*, not *them*: "*It fell. I retrieved it. For you.*"

All right. One question answered. But she was still confused. "*How did you know*?" She gestured, compensating for her uneven diction. "*How did you know about me*?"

"*Know*?" He considered the question. "*We have always known...for long times...ever since your sister came to the hills.*" He turned, facing the cliffs that stood beyond the wall of trees. "*She came at night, flying quiet and dark. But we knew. I knew. Long-Eyes saw.*"

Cara shivered. *Quiet and dark* was an apt description of the lander. It flew on ionic wind, without visible exhaust or guiding lights. Until now, she had never considered that the villagers might have seen it. Indeed, her months of eavesdropping had turned up no indication that the villagers

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knew they were being observed. Yet here was Long-Eyes telling her differently. "*You knew*?" she asked. "*You knew about my predecessor*?"

"*Yes. First about her. Then about you. When we heard the clear-sky thunder, we knew that you had come to take her place.*"

Teleportation was far from silent. The power beams that accompanied orbit-to-ground transmission gave off thunderous roars that, loud as they were, should not have attracted attention on an island of frequent storms.

But evidently they had.

Long-Eyes said, "X-ah *brought you here to help us. It put you on the cliff, and now it has brought you to me.*"

"*No. That's not the way it is. I'm* — "

He turned away as she struggled with the words. "*We need to go now,*" he said. "X-ah *promised to protect me until you came. But now that you are here* — " He paused, cocking his head, listening to the forest. "*We must hurry before it comes.*"

"*Before what comes*?"

He glanced at her. Softly, he muttered: "*X-eeÑa.*"

Cara covered her mouth, subvocing to Alpha: "What'd he say?"

"No idea."

"Check."

"Doing it now." A pause, and then: "Not in our database. We're hearing the word for the first time." She played it back, letting Cara hear it again: *X-eeÑa*.

To Long-Eyes, Cara said, "*I don't know that word.*"

"*Yes. I understand. The* X-ooh *is as ignorant as it is powerful.*"

"*Ignorant*?"

He gestured toward her flier. "*You studied our voices. You listened, but some things are best not spoken aloud.*"

"*But you're speaking them now.*"

"*Yes. Because you are asking.*" He turned, moving toward another remnant of forest road.

She hurried after him. "*I'm not* — " she struggled for the words. "*I'm not...what you think.*"

He walked faster, his muscular feet slapping the hard-packed clay.

She broke into a jog, keeping pace. "*I'm not a* X-ooh," she said. "*Whatever a* X-ooh *is, I'm not* — "

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He stopped walking, gesturing for silence.

In the distance, beyond the forest brume, something stirred — a sound like the thumping of massive feet. Softly, Long-Eyes muttered: *"It's coming."*

"It?"

The sound changed course.

She turned, following his gaze. To the south, beyond the point where distant trees merged to form a wall of trunks and shadows, the sound began moving away, heading toward the village.

Long-Eyes gestured to her shoulder pack. *"The running wheel,"* he said. *"You need to hurry."*

Cara reached around, unhitching the rover from its stays. *"You want me to use this?"*

"Yes!" His nostrils flared. *"Hurry!"*

"Hurry where?"

"To the village."

She gripped the rover, swinging it by its handle to extend the control shaft. *"But it can only carry me."*

"Yes! You go!"

She kicked the pedals into place.

"Go to the field," Long-Eyes said. *"Use your power. Kill the* X-eeNa!"

"Kill it?"

"We will help. We will distract it. We will make it an easy target for your power. Then you will kill it."

She turned from Long-Eyes, trying to remain calm as she called to Alpha. "What do I do?" She spoke aloud, no longer subvocing. "Tell me what to do!"

Long-Eyes stared, apparently intrigued by the cadence of human speech.

Alpha said, "Go to the field."

"And do what?"

"What you're there for. Observe. Record what happens." It was the advice of someone who had nothing to lose. If Cara were killed in action, the mission would continue with a fresh fieldworker, teleported from the orbiter's files, integrated within the chamber that Cara had primed and calibrated before leaving the base. The replacement would

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take possession of the outpost, review the records, and continue the study.

Long-Eyes said, "*You need to hurry. Go to the field. Use your power. Kill the* X-eeNa!"

Cara leaped onto the rover, leaned forward, and accelerated toward the village.

SHE VEERED WEST, cutting a beeline toward the field, not decelerating until the trees thinned and the ground angled upward. Straight ahead, coalescing through the ferns and hanging fungi, the village stood backlit by evening sun. She changed course, turning left, steering beneath a cover of low-hanging branches....

The gyros cut out as she hopped from the pedals. She dropped to her knees, coming to rest behind a clump of ferns. Before her, the field stretched toward the village wall. Above the gate, lookouts peered between fire-hardened stakes, listening as the approaching thumps grew louder, coming closer....

A flock of leather-winged slugs leapt from the trees, soaring over the field on jets of vented air, scattering into the dusky sky as a massive head emerged from the jungle. It hovered two meters from the ground, gliding outward on the end of a powerful neck.

Alpha said, "I'm recording your visuals, but the Ministry's still going to want your impressions. Better start talking."

Cara swallowed, watching the thing as it stepped onto the field, its profile so unnervingly alien that it seemed to shift before her — altering as her mind wrestled with the contours of its strangeness. "First impression?" She glanced at the misshapen head, shielding her eyes as it passed before the sun. "It's hideous!"

The creature turned, cutting the sunlight into flaring rays.

"Its head is as big as I am."

It pivoted, surveying the field.

"Its jaws are misaligned, with the mandible extending beyond the snout." She squinted, trying to comprehend. "It's got a face like a deep-sea predator...a viperfish...that's the closest — "

The beast roared, rearing its head, opening its jaws.

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She saw it then. The lower jaw was not a jaw at all. Rather than swinging downward, it split vertically — cleaving at the chin, becoming a pair of muscular limbs, each anchored beneath the head and sporting fanglike claws. And now, with those limbs flexing wide, she saw the beast's true mouth — an orifice near the top of the throat, chinless as the maw of a shark. She saw it for a second, and then the monster turned again, staring at the wall.

It seemed to be waiting.

Cara studied its profile. "I'm trying to get a handle on the physiology, but I keep getting lost. It has avian hips, but it's wingless — no forward appendages other than the ones that cover its mouth. The head is counterbalanced by a gigantic tail. It's obviously warm-blooded, agile, swift. I'm going to need months to review these visuals, Alpha. This thing's like nothing I've — "

A tremor moved through the village wall.

The animal leaned forward, lowering its head as the palisade gate stuttered back along wooden runners, cracking open to form a gap barely wide enough for a villager to squeeze through.

"Something's happening." She saw movement within the gap. A shadow emerged, coalescing into a village child. Another followed. Then another. They walked with halting steps, heads bowed, shoulders hunched — goslings with pear-shaped bodies. Their arms, folded like wings, shivered beneath capes of woven reeds.

Then the gate skidded back, closing tight while the procession hurried across the field.

The animal watched, its tail twitching like a sputtering cable.

Cara muttered, "I don't believe what I'm seeing."

The beast moved forward.

"This looks like a sacrifice."

The children gathered in a tight huddle, heads together, shoulders locked.

Cara stiffened. "I can't watch this."

Alpha said nothing. The scene's horror had taken her voice.

The beast crouched, folding its long legs, lowering the arch of its hips until the mandible arms touched the ground. Cara tried turning away. But she couldn't. It was her duty to watch, record, understand. And when it

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was over, when the beast had lopped the pear-shaped bodies into its crescent mouth and lumbered back into the forest, when all that remained of the children was an oval depression in the furrowed ground, then she finally mustered the strength to turn away. And when she did, she found that she was no longer alone amid the ferns.

Long-Eyes stood behind her, panting from his race through the forest. "*You did not kill it!*" He stood erect, shoulders stiff, hands clenched — an angry pose. "*The beast stayed in place. We gave you an easy mark. But you did not kill it!*"

Wailing voices rose from the village. The gate opened, scraping back once more. Cara tried watching to see if more villagers were coming out, but Long-Eyes stepped in front of her, standing close, blocking her view. "*You did not use your power,*" he said.

"*Power?*"

"*You are a* X-ooh." His faced darkened, turning sanguine near the spiracle ridge above his eyes. "*The* X-ah *delivered you to help us. The* X-ah *provided and you did not — "*

"*No!*" she shouted back. "*Not me. I'm — "* She paused. How could she even begin to explain what she truly was?

Long-Eyes spared her the effort. "*Your version of who you are doesn't matter. For us you are a* X-ooh." He reached out, grasping her shoulders, his hands hot with anger.

She pulled away. To Alpha, she muttered, "What do I do?"

"Return to base."

"But he's asking for help."

"Not your job, Sister. Return to base."

Long-Eyes watched, cocking his head as Cara spoke to empty air. And then, feeling overwhelmed, Cara mounted her rover and whirred away, racing for the trees, not looking back, not even thinking about what she would do if she met the *X-eeÑa* in the forest. For the moment, all that mattered was getting back to the illusion of objective study, away from the problem that was not hers.

The camp was as Cara had left it, but the setting sun had deepened its contours, bathing everything with low-angled light. Her shadow followed her, extending from her heels like an elongated skid, moving beside her as

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she turned toward her predecessor's grave — a cairn of rocks with a hand auger drill for a headstone. Her predecessor had used the drill to draw core samples from the forest floor. Now the tool tossed a cruciform silhouette across the grave.

Cara looked left and doubleblinked, disengaging the streaming interface with the orbiter, opting for five minutes of privacy as she addressed the spirit of the woman within the cairn. "What should we do?" she asked, sitting by the grave, leaning back to search her own thoughts for an answer.

Her mind calmed. She closed her eyes, recalling the life of another Cara — an athlete with an aptitude for language and science, a twenty-three-year-old protégé named Cara Randall....

As the inheritor of Randall's memories, Cara Gamma carried impressions of places that she herself had never been: the Ministry's cloistered lectoria, flight simulators, and exercise chambers.

She recalled the joys of study, accessing the cybernetic wisdom of a hundred years of theoretical xenthropology. And when the call went out for volunteers to serve as fieldworkers on the Ministry's growing catalogue of unexplored worlds, she took the vows and passed through the one-way doors that led to the chamber of scanning and deconstruction.

She remembered the hiss of the closing seal and the dim pause that preceded the blinding light. Randall's memories ended with that flash, but Cara Gamma did not need inherited recollections to know what happened next. The facts were all matters of procedure.

The deconstructing flash transferred Randall's essence to a pair of identical crystals — one went into the Ministry vaults, the other into the AI system of an unwomanned vessel bound for a point of perturbation in the orbit of a fifth-magnitude star. Thus, the digitized Cara Randall became Cara Prime, the template for a series of lone observers who would study a planet no human had ever seen.

The first reintegration of Prime occurred when the vessel drew close enough to verify the planet's existence. The shipboard computer activated the kiln, igniting the blocks of compacted matter that provided the substance for Cara Alpha — the first daughter of Prime.

After climbing from the chamber, Alpha assumed the role of orbiting

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commander, and her first job, after checking herself for defects and wiggling into the piezoelectric unitard that powered her cybernetic system, was to verify the computer's assessment of the planet.

What she found was a world inhabited by a sentient species that had migrated from its point of origin to occupy a vast triangular continent. Along the opposing shores of an inland sea, two protocities had settled into a state of protracted aggression. Likewise, in the hinterlands, warring tribes slaughtered each other for possession of fertile deltas and valleys. These were not good places to initiate ground-based observation, but looking elsewhere she found isolated settlements dotting the forests of coastal islands. It was on one of these islands that she found a village of docile agrarians who had moved beyond the study of war. They lived inland, away from beaches that would have left them vulnerable to attacks from the sea. There, Alpha began the study.

After selecting the site, Alpha recalibrated the shipboard integrator and primed the kiln. Then she closed the hatch, activated the system, and gave life to Cara Beta.

It was Beta's job to pilot the lander to the planet's surface. Once there, she set up camp and began the first phase of ground observation. Two days passed without incident, and then, suddenly, Beta awoke to find herself facedown in the center of camp. She had blacked out.

A day later, it happened again, only this time when she regained her senses she found herself lying dangerously close to the edge of the cliff.

The next day, she blacked out twice in the morning, then once again in the afternoon. Each time, Alpha's voice brought her back, calling to her in tones that grew more anxious with each recurrence. Beta tried attributing the seizures to defects in her cybernetic interfaces, but when checks of those systems revealed nothing unusual, she and Alpha had no choice but to contemplate the grim alternative.

The process of deconstruction and integration had a failure rate of point-four percent. Sometimes there were errors in the scans. Other times, data became corrupted during imprinting. Beyond that, with each repeated integration, there was a chance that fluctuations in power or disruptions of the data stream could result in a defective copy — a functioning integration that soon lost its physiological integrity.

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Not wanting to jeopardize the mission, Cara Beta instructed Alpha to send a replacement. Then, with her interfaces disengaged, Beta self-administered a lethal injection of morphine sulfate, stretched back beneath the lander's shadow, and entered a final blackout.

Within the hour, Cara Gamma arrived to bury the remains.

Cara leaned toward the grave, whispering to the stones. "What do we do, Sister?"

The stones lay still, cooling in the fading light.

Cara stood, turning toward the village as she felt Alpha coming back on-line. She stared through the veil of camouflaged netting, into the distance to see what appeared to be a lone figure standing outside the village wall. "Alpha, you on-line?"

"Here, Sister."

"Give me your view of the village field."

Alpha complied, dropping an orbital shot into an ineye window.

Cara closed her eyes. The image expanded, filling her head. There, amid blocky pixels and the wavy distortions of evening air, she saw a villager standing on the furrowed ground. She wondered if it was Long-Eyes waiting for her to return. "The villagers knew about us from the beginning, Sister."

"Yes," Alpha said. "So Long-Eyes claims."

"He says I am a *X-ooh*, sent by *X-ah*."

"But you are Cara Gamma, the third integration of Cara Prime. The Ministry sent you. A starship brought you. These things you know for certain."

"So it seems." She turned, looking back at the lander, its sides open to reveal the outer hull of the integration chamber.

"Long-Eyes said I have power."

"You do, although it is not the kind that kills monsters."

Atop the integration chamber, a heat exchanger sat like a steel lily, waiting to catch the next energy beam from the orbiting gun.

"But what if it is?" Cara said. "What if my power *is* that kind?" She approached the chamber, climbing onto its hull to inspect the reflector — the fist-sized cube that ensured a direct hit from the power beam. In some ways, the little single-use block of anodized metal was the integrator's

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most vital component — so vital that each supply transmission included a set of spares....

It came to her then. She knew what she had to do.

LONG-EYES stood alone in the field, staring at Cara as she emerged from the forest. Something in his expression told her that he had known she was coming. "*You are a strange* X-ooh," he said.

"*No. Not a* X-ooh." She lifted a heavy strap from her shoulder, unslinging the improvised weapon that hung across her back. She held it so he could see it: a fearsome graft of steel and aluminum — shaped like a cross, wielded like a sword with a spiral blade. "*I am not a* X-ooh. *But maybe I can help.*"

Long-Eyes studied the weapon.

Cara said, "*If that beast comes again — "*

"*There is no question,*" Long-Eyes said. "X-eeÑa *will come.*"

Cara swung the weapon, checking the bindings that held the spare reflector to the auger's handle.

Long-Eyes said, "*You have brought your power this time.*"

"*No.*" She stopped swinging. "*My power comes from the sky.*" She spoke more fluently now, having taken time to practice the things she needed to say. "*This is only a tool to guide the power.*"

Long-Eyes leaned closer, looking at himself in the reflector's right-angled mirrors.

She glanced toward the wall. The gate remained closed. Silence hung in the darkening air. She asked, "*Why are you standing here?*"

"*Waiting,*" he said. "*Waiting for you or the* X-eeÑa. *I am glad you came first.*"

He was standing on the spot where the children had offered themselves to the beast. Dried blood stained the dirt.

"*I offered to stand here,*" he said. "*It was the only thing to do. I had promised the children that you would not let them die. Their task was to distract the beast, to give you time to use your power. I promised them that they would not die if they did as they were told.*"

"*You promised them?*"

"*Yes. They were not supposed to die. That was your doing...and my*

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undoing." He looked toward the forest. "*Still, I am glad you have come back.*" He cocked his head, listening with dilated ears.

Something stirred within the trees.

"*It is coming,*" Long-Eyes said. "*It hears our voices. It will not pass up an easy meal.*"

The rumble came again, closer.

Cara turned away, speaking to Alpha: "Stand by to power up."

"Standing by."

The gun took nearly two minutes to charge, and once armed it had to be fired quickly to avoid damaging the capacitors. Cara's plan was simple. First, she had to plant the marker in the animal's side. After that, she needed to keep the thing out in the open, in clear sight of the marking laser that aimed the gun, away from the village where a direct hit would risk collateral damage. As for herself, if she were unable to get clear of the blast, there was a good chance that Alpha would soon be sending a replacement to the cliff-top base. For that reason, Cara had used one of the spare reflectors from her cache of supplies, leaving the original cube affixed to the top of the camp's integration chamber. One way or the other, whether she succeeded or failed, the study would continue.

The thump of the creature's long strides drew closer, the noise coming faster and louder as a cloud of slugs jetted from the trees. Then, seconds later, the *X-eeÑa* emerged, spreading its mandible arms.

Cara mounted the rover. "This is it, Sister. Power the gun!"

"It's powering."

Cara turned to Long-Eyes. "*I will do what I can. No promises.*"

He raised his hands, folding them in a show of thanks.

She turned away, leaned forward, and took off across the field.

"Gun is charging, Sister. Full power in one-one-eight seconds."

Cara continued straight until she was sure she had attracted the animal's attention. Then she leaned left, veering parallel to the village wall.

The animal followed, coming on fast, its long strides easily matching the speed of the rover.

Cara looked back, saw the mandible arms coming toward her, and leaned into a tight turn that carried her back through the veil of her own dust.

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The beast swung around, tracking her as she cut a tight arc around its legs. The ground shook as it turned in place. She moved with it, staying ahead of the arms only to find her course blocked by the whiplike tail. She veered again, ducked down, and hurtled between its legs.

Alpha called to her as she emerged from beneath its hips: "Did you do it? Did you plant the reflector?"

"No." She steadied the auger against her shoulder. "I'll get it this time." She leaned again, giving the beast a wide berth as she swung around for another go.

"Fifty seconds, Sister."

The animal lunged, reaching for her, forcing her into a one-eighty spin that sent her skidding back the way she had come. The claws closed behind her, shearing the empty air.

This time she kept moving straight, speeding toward the edge of the forest before looking back to find that the animal had given up the chase.

She pulled on her control shaft, decelerating, spinning to a stop. She stared back at the creature's mandible arms. Its crescent mouth quivered, pulsing in the shadow of its face.

It leered.

She returned the stare.

"Thirty seconds, Sister."

What had she been thinking? The plan was impossible. There was no way she was going to plant the marker, and now the clock was running out.

"Sister? You all right?"

She didn't bother to answer. There was nothing to say. She had failed again. But then, from across the field, the sound of clicking: Long-Eyes calling to the *X-eeÑa*.

The beast turned.

Cara leveled her weapon. "All right. One more try." She leaned forward, picking up speed.

She wondered what Long-Eyes thought of her now — a one-wheeled knight with a corkscrew javelin. Was this the sort of thing a *X-ooh* was supposed to do? Surely, there was nothing like this in the village legends.

"Twenty seconds, Sister! Place that marker and get out of range!"

Cara focused on the target, staying the course, holding the shaft steady, watching the flexing mass of the animal's right hip. She dodged the

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tail and raced toward the leg. And then, with a jolt that nearly threw her from the pedals, the auger struck its target, plunging deep, not stopping until the shaft hit bone and the beast roared like a klaxon.

She spun, bounding away, losing control. Something clipped the rover, knocking the wheel from under her. She never saw what it was. It could have been the animal's tail, or its leg, or even a ridge in the furrowed ground. Whatever it was, it sent her into a tumble — feet slipping across the sky, head plowing the dust...

...and somewhere, a voice: "Ten seconds!"

Cara rolled, careering across the ground, coming to rest with the animal's terrible head lunging for her. "Alpha! Fire the gun!"

The mandible arms swung wide.

Cara scrambled, crawling like a crab. "Do it now!"

The sky brightened, sparking with light from the orbiter. It was not the high-energy bolt — the one that would ignite the animal's blood and send its pieces scattering over the field. This first light was only the marking laser, the low-energy beam to illuminate the reflector and guarantee a direct hit.

The cool flash backlit the creature's body. Cara braced herself. And then...

The night exploded.

Her suit ignited, melting her piezoelectric unitard, searing her flesh as she flew into the air. Furrows raced beneath her, streaked with her leaping shadow — a cruciform silhouette that swelled as it rose to slam against her outthrust hands. *Bam!* No pain. The agony would come later — after the shock had left her bones, after her flesh realized how badly it had been maimed.

A woman screamed, a voice like hers but not hers, a distant call that Cara could not answer. She could barely breathe, and it was all she could do to remain conscious as she pulled her face from the dust and looked back at the cleaved remains of the *X-eeÑa*.

The creature's torso had exploded, leaving the head and tail convulsing on the ground. The eyes glared, staring at her, burning with numb rage as the mandible arms clawed the dirt. And still the distant voice shrilled inside her. "Respond, Sister! Are you receiving?"

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Cara coughed, finding her voice. "Receiving." She looked down at her arms, the left one bare and bloody, her cybernetic unitard ruined. "I hear you, Alpha."

"Your bios are offline, visuals full of noise."

"But you hear me?"

"Yes. Hear you. What's your condition?"

Cara tried lifting her arm. It responded. Still no pain. "Can't tell. I'm alive. But everything's...fuzzy."

Long-Eyes raced toward her.

She tried to rise. The world spun as the village gate slid open. Villagers hurried out. Not children this time, but tall males with heavy legs, kicking dusty clouds.

"I've got company." She tried focusing on the running males. "Can you see them?"

"Orbital image only. You're still not streaming."

Cara slumped to her knees.

Long-Eyes caught her, grabbing her beneath the shoulders, helping her to her feet. She fell against him, smearing his tunic with blood as the males gathered around her, pressing close, their faces taut with admiration. She kept her eyes open, returning their stares, hoping her vision would go back online so Alpha could see what she was seeing.

Long-Eyes said, "*The Elders will want to meet you. They will want to hear what you have done.*" He walked forward, guiding her toward the open gate.

The crowd walked with them, and it was then that Cara glimpsed a shadow rising over the heads of the males. She turned, stumbling as she saw the *X-eeÑa* rearing high into the night sky. Her breath caught, and then she saw the hands that held the monster's neck and arms. The head swayed, dead eyes gleaming as the villagers carried their trophy through the gate and onto the narrow lanes that wound toward the dome in the center of the village.

They took her to a hut beside the great wooden dome, and there they peeled away the remnants of her ruined suit, clicking and whistling at the maze of cybernetic conductors that lay between her skin and unitard. She was hurting now. Pain thundered as the villagers dressed her wounds.

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"Sister!" She called to the orbiter as she lay on her back, staring at a ceiling of bent poles and cured bark. Smoke from a central fire gathered between the beams, swirling through an oval vent. "I'm in the village, Sister. I wish you could see. I wish we were recording."

They brought her a steaming bowl that smelled of roots and grass. The drink tingled, warming her throat and stomach as she forced it down. Almost instantly, her burns stopped hurting, and soon she found herself standing under her own power as artisans draped a woven tunic about her shoulders. She raised her good arm, marveling at how the cloth followed the contours of her frame.

"They're giving me clothes. The fit is almost perfect. And the top's embroidered with — " She paused as she made sense of the pattern: dark threads depicting a warrior battling a beast with mandible arms. It was a stylized design, limited by the texture and color of the materials; nevertheless, the stick-figure warrior seemed to stand upon a rounded foot — a shape that resembled a rover's wheel.

She turned to Long-Eyes. "*When*?" She pressed a fist against the garment. "*When...you make this*?"

His features tightened. "*I did not make it. The cloth is old.*"

"*How old*?"

"X-eeo *days*. X-eeo *nights*."

X-eeo. She knew that word. It was not so much a number as a concept — an expression used when speaking of things too vast for counting, such as seeds in the field or trees in the forest.

"X-eeo *nights ago*?" The words baffled her. "*How could you have known*?"

He leaned close, uttering only a single syllable — a word whose significance she still did not fully understand: "*X-ah*."

"*X-ah*?" She said it back to him. "*What is* X-ah?"

"*It is what brings the* X-ooh."

"*What is* X-ooh?"

He opened his arms, reaching to embrace her. "*The* X-ooh," he said, "*is* X-aha."

Long-Eyes took her to see the Elders, processing into a great chamber that glowed with blazing fire. Ribs hung from spits, dripping fat into the flames, filling the air with the smoke of *X-eeÑa* flesh. And near the flames,

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impaled on blackened stakes, the beast's severed head glowed in the firelight.

The Elders welcomed her, and she sat with them, drinking from their bowls and listening as Long-Eyes clicked and whistled an improvised song about the power of *X-aha*.

Again she shivered, thinking about how rapidly things had changed. For a scientist who had planned to devote a large part of her life to the impartial gathering of data, here was a new kind of accomplishment. She had become a warrior hero, a champion — the *X-ooh* from *X-ah*. To Alpha she said, "I could get used to this."

"No reason why you shouldn't. You're one of them now. It's an incredible opportunity. If only we could get your vision back online."

Long-Eyes returned to Cara's side as a young song-singer launched into a whistling lyric about the power of the *X-ooh*.

Long-Eyes said, "*Your wounds are deep.*"

"*Are they*?" She slurred the words. She didn't care. She was *X-aha*, the *X-ooh* from *X-ah*. If she couldn't slur her words, who could? "*I don't feel them.*"

"*You are strong.*"

"*Yes.*" She raised her bowl. "*And so is this.*" She drank.

"*It is good you are strong.*"

"*Yes. It is all good.*"

"*And your things. They are strong, too.*"

"*My things*?"

He resorted to pidgin, using gestures to describe the auger that had directed the power beam.

"*No,*" she said. "*No more.*" She raised her good hand, opening her fingers in a sign of letting go. "*Gone!*" Eventually, she was going to have to return to her base. She would get Alpha to send her fresh supplies: another rover, a new unitard. But all that could wait for now.

She leaned toward Long-Eyes. "*But I have other things for you. Better things.*" The words flowed, no longer impeded by doubt. "*I will teach you. You will learn my ways, and I will master yours. We will become each other's students. You and I will — "*

He tensed, drawing his shoulders together, leaning back in a troubled gesture.

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She asked, "*What is wrong?*"

"*When will we find time for such idle things! What of the* X-eeÑa?"

She glanced at the severed head. "*What do you mean?*"

He looked confused. "*You must help us fight it.*"

She froze, wondering if she had heard him correctly.

"*It,*" he said. "*You must help us fight it.*"

But the word he used was not *it.*

In the native language, barely a half tone separated singular from plural. To human ears, even to gifted ones that had spent months studying the inflections, the difference was barely discernable.

Cara drew an uneasy breath, letting it out in a constricted sigh: "Oh my god!" She looked at Long-Eyes, holding his gaze as she spoke the pronoun again, giving it the proper inflection — the slightly higher tone that made all the difference. "*Them,*" she said. "Oh my god!" She reached out, grasping his arm. "*How many?*" She swallowed. "*How many of those monsters are there?*"

He answered with a single word. "*X-eeo.*"

She released his arm, sitting back as the expression quaked through her: *X-eeo* — the number beyond counting.

He leaned closer. "*At first they will come one at a time. But soon there will be many, then more — rising from the forest like a deadly crop. It is not always this way. Most winters it is only one...or a few. Most seasons we can appease them with offerings, but* X-ah *tells us that this will be a winter of* X-eeo X-eeÑa *— a winter like the one that destroyed the other villages. That is why we are glad that* X-ah *has sent you to us. We are glad to have such a powerful* X-ooh."

Nearby, the young story-singer paused in his narrative. He turned to Long-Eyes, raised his hands, and echoed the phrase: "X-ah *has sent us a powerful* X-ooh!"

Others joined in, repeating the words, and soon the great dome reverberated with joyful praise.

Long-Eyes leaned close. "*Lookouts stand watch by the wall. They will let us know when the* X-eeÑa *return. Until then, you must rest, collect your strength for the next battle.*"

Cara turned away, looking again at the beast's head. "Alpha," she said. "I'm going to need some supplies." She stood, testing the strength in her legs and discovering she could stand on her own.

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The room fell silent.

"You hear me, Sister? I need a transmission — supplies *and* personnel."

"Personnel?"

"I can't handle this alone. Send me Delta."

"No," Alpha said. "Can't do that. No multiples in the field. You know the rules."

"Forget the rules. I need Delta...and rovers...and all the core samplers and reflectors you can send."

"No Delta. It's a breach of protocol."

"So breach it."

"You can't make that call." Alpha's voice rose, bordering on indignation. "I'm the commander. Who do you think you are?"

Cara looked down at the pattern on her tunic: a lithe warrior riding a speeding wheel. When she answered, it was in the native tongue. "*I am* X-aha *the* X-ooh."

"You can't be serious."

"I can't be otherwise. Transmit Delta. Have her bring the supplies to the village."

Alpha did not respond. Cara gave up on her, took her seat, and tried thinking of another way. A minute passed. Then another. And then, in the distance, muffled thunder split the night.

The villagers looked toward the dissipating roar, hands raised in amazement, nostrils flaring. They knew the sound. And Cara, although she had never heard it from so far away, recognized it too. She closed her eyes, listening to the echo of what Long-Eyes had called clear-sky thunder.

"Thank you, Alpha."

Cara looked up to find Long-Eyes staring at her.

He asked, "*You are talking to your* X-ah?"

"*Yes.*"

"*You are making a plan to face the* X-eeo X-eeÑa?"

"*Yes.*" She considered the supply of raw-matter packets that Beta had brought in the lander. The supply was limited, but if she and her sisters began relying on the village to provide food and shelter, the packets could be used exclusively for personnel, rovers, and reflectors.

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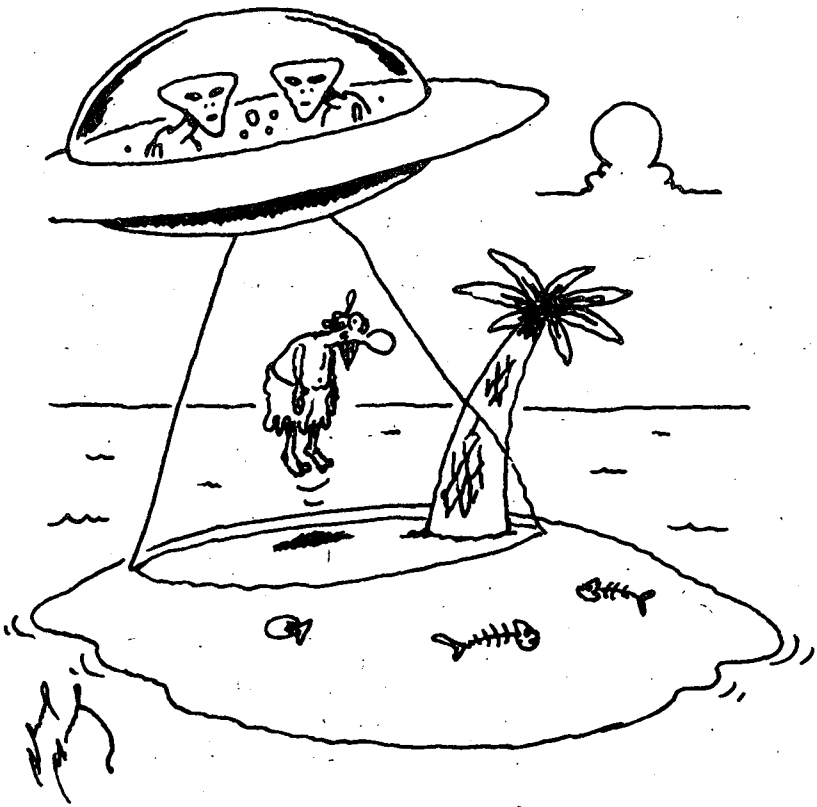
She looked at Long-Eyes. "*I need to explain. I need to tell you what I'm going to do.*"

"*No need for that. My own* X-ah *has told me.*" He leaned closer, his nostrils flaring. He pressed his hands to his chest. "*There is only one way to fight* X-eeo X-eeÑa." He paused.

She knew what he was going to say.

They spoke it together: "*X-eeo X-aha!*" ☙



"He doesn't seem frightened like the others."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Wicked Lovely, by Melissa Marr, HarperTeen, 2007, $16.99.

I'VE NOTICED a curious thing with the books that have come through my P.O. box in the past while: The so-called YA books often feature much more fully realized — and likable — characters than do the adult ones. In fact, it's been a while since I found a character I like enough in an adult genre book that I'm willing to spend a few hours in their company.

Not that a book needs a likable character to make it a good book. (See the review of *The Memory Tree* below for more on that.) But, well, call me old-fashioned. My reading time is limited and I'd rather spend it with characters that I can care about. And I certainly never reread books with unlikable characters.

Now I'm not saying there aren't adult genre books with good characterization, or even likable characters. I'm just not seeing much of them in the books that come to my attention.

Which isn't to say that the YA books are all gold. Any number of them also get put aside after a few pages for that same problem of flat characterization. But fewer of them are problematic, and those that are good are very good.

Such as Melissa Marr's assured debut, *Wicked Lovely*.

A quick touchstone would be Holly Black's books for older readers such as *Tithe* and *Valiant*, and I apologize in advance if that comment seems like a variation on the endless publishing promos for some new high fantasy being "in the tradition of *The Lord of the Rings*."

It's just that both writers can pull off the wonderful trick of penning contemporary fairy tales set in gritty urban environments with enviable ease. It's not a matter of suspending your disbelief while reading their books; the characters

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and story (however outlandish the latter might seem in a rational world) just sound *right*.

Wicked Lovely's Aislinn can see faeries and lives with her grandmother, who has set a number of rules for her teenaged granddaughter, which boil down to never attracting the attention of faeries, and never letting on that she can see them. The faeries are everywhere, tormenting humans in a hundred little ways. But that's nothing compared to what they'd do to a human who can see them.

Marr sets this up very well, with scenes that show rather than tell. She also sets the limits early on, such as how — unless they're very powerful, and there are few such — faeries can't abide anything with iron in it. So Aislinn's real place of refuge is not her own home, but that of her friend Seth, who lives in an abandoned railway car that's been remade into comfortable living quarters. The difference is, Seth's a few years older than she and he can live on his own. Aislinn still has to make the uncomfortable treks between school, her grandmother's house, and Seth's railway car.

Until the worst thing happens: Aislinn gets noticed by the faeries, by Keenan, the Summer King, no less. And he's decided that she's to be his next queen.

After that, things only get more complicated.

Marr does a number of things very well. I've already mentioned her characterization and the easy way she has of getting background information across without being obvious about it. But she also has a fine ear for both dialogue and descriptive prose. Her plot and subplots keep you on the edge of your seat, and continue to surprise right through to the end. And she's done a terrific job of integrating the dangers, folklore, and flexible morality of faerie with the real world.

What I like best, however, is how, except for the evil Winter Queen who's a bit of a stock villain, Marr's characters don't fit easily into "good" and "bad" designations. They have good motivations for why they do the things they do, and they're fallible. Better yet, they learn from their mistakes.

This is a debut that reads like the work of a seasoned pro and I can't wait to see what she comes up with next.

Into the Wild, by Sarah Beth Durst, Razorbill, 2007, $15.99.

But meanwhile, there are always other books to read...such as *Into*

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the Wild, another first novel by an author who delivers.

The readership this is aimed at is probably skewed a little younger than that of *Wicked Lovely*. I say this because the characterization is more straightforward, without as many nuances. But Sarah Beth Durst kept me reading because she's so inventive with her take on fairy tales' relevance to our world.

In this case, it's literal. Our point-of-view character is Julie, the daughter of Rapunzel. Yes, *that* Rapunzel. And her brother is Puss-in-Boots, still in cat form. Julie's in charge of keeping an eye on "the wild," which appears to be a mass of hungry vines that lives under Julie's bed and tends to eat her jeans and shoes if she doesn't keep them out of its reach.

But it turns out that the wild is more than simply a nuisance. Julie quickly finds that out when it escapes and begins to transform the whole of her small New England town into the dark forest of fairy tales.

I'm not sure why it is, but we seem to be having a bit of a run of stories dealing with the characters of fairy tales escaping the confines of their stories to live hidden among us. In this column alone we've talked about Bill Willingham's *Fables* comic books and Michael Buckley's *Sisters Grimm* series, for starters.

But Durst has her own spin on things and there's something just so right about Rapunzel hiding out as a hairdresser and the wicked witch of Hansel & Gretel running a motel. And once the wild transforms the town into an old forest, Durst has a terrific explanation for how this has all come about and what Julie needs to do to set things right once more. Along the way, Durst also slips in some fascinating thoughts on the importance of these stories and why they still have as much resonance today.

Mostly, though, the fun of *Into the Wild* is in recognizing the iconic figures from fairy tales and seeing them in this new light that Durst has provided for us. You'll breeze through this book and you'll have a fine time while doing so.

The Memory Tree, by John R. Little, Nocturne Press, 2007, $27.99.

Here's a case of a book where I never warmed to the main character (middle-aged stockbroker Sam Ellis), but everything else was so interesting that I still felt compelled to read it straight through.

Ellis lives in Seattle and life is

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good. He's successful at his job and he loves his wife. But he carries a secret — deep inside — and scars. And then one day he falls back in time to the summer he was thirteen, where he meets his parents and his thirteen-year-old self. It's the summer when everything changed for him, though he doesn't remember why. But the longer he spends there, the more he begins to understand.

John R. Little is another new writer for me, and a good one. His prose sometimes gets a little choppy, but he has such a compelling voice that most of the time you don't notice. I also liked how he didn't spend a lot of time explaining how Ellis keeps returning to the past, but does deal with the ramifications of his disappearance from the present time. Or rather, the fact that when he goes into the past, he falls into a coma in the present.

Is it a dream, or an hallucination? It doesn't matter. I was much more interested in finding out what happened next.

I don't want to get into too much detail for fear of spoiling the story for you, but I would like to return to the likability issue. The fact that I didn't much care for Ellis was irrelevant to my appreciating his story. I came to understand why he is the way he is, and could certainly empathize. But in the end, it still didn't make me like him any more.

But I loved how John Little brought the blue-collar lives of small town characters to life. And how he showed that while it might have been a simpler time back then, people are always complicated.

I always appreciate a good time travel story, no matter how the traveling takes place, and if you give this a try, I think you'll like it, too.

The Memory Tree is also available in a less expensive trade paperback edition ($15.99) and a pricier signed hardcover ($45).

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint; P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

Endless Things: An Ægypt Novel, by John Crowley, Small Beer Press, 2007, $24.

GREAT WORK OF TIME

IT HAS BEEN two decades since the publication of *Ægypt*, the first book in John Crowley's sequence now known as *Ægypt*. As Crowley states in his Last Author Note,

> With *Endless Things*, the work I have always in my own mind called *Ægypt* is as complete as it will ever be, and consists now of four parts: *The Solitudes*, first published as *Ægypt* in 1987; *Love & Sleep*, 1994; *Dæmonomania*, 2000; and the present volume.... The conception and writing go back ten years farther.

Crowley describes Ægypt as a single novel in four parts. [The four books will be reprinted, with slightly altered text, in a uniform edition beginning with *The Solitudes* in Fall 2007.] I've read all of the volumes, save the last, more than once over the last twenty years. But I have not read Ægypt all as a piece, in one swell foop, which would give a very different experience of the work. And so I have never read Ægypt as I gather its author originally intended, without the rising expectations engendered by publication of each successive volume at six- or seven-year intervals, without a sense of scriptus interruptus heightened rather than allayed by the appearance during that time of two very different novels, *The Translator* (2002) and the Byronic mash-up *Lord Byron's Novel: The Evening Land* (2005); three story collections — *Novelty* (1989), *Antiquities* (1993), and *Novelties & Souvenirs* (2004); and an unsettling novella, "The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines" (2005).

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I vividly recall my initial encounter with the first volume of *Ægypt* in April 1987. As I began to read it, the story grew intimately entwined with the season's new warmth and falling rain, a sense of doors and worlds opening, not just on the page but all around me. I'll recapitulate here the bare bones of Ægypt's plot, for new readers unfamiliar with the work. In dealing with *Endless Things*, I'll try to avoid spoilers, though the work as a whole is so massively erudite and complex I'm not sure I could reveal its secrets; I'm not sure I even understand them. But I'll try.

Crowley's book famously asks the question, "What if the world has a plot?" and then tenders as response, "there is more than one history of the world." In truth, this meta-novel is more concerned with correspondences, symbolic and spiritual and philosophical, than it is with more conventional narrative tropes. The tale opens with a brief prologue, an angelic vision granted in 1582 to the English alchemist Dr. John Dee, adviser to Queen Elizabeth I, translator of Euclid, and author of a work on symbolic language titled *Monas Hieroglyphica*. The action then shifts fleetingly to a second prologue set in 1952, where we glimpse an eleven-year-old boy named Pierce Moffett in bed, reading a novel about the Renaissance philosopher-scientist Giordano Bruno, a book written by a once-popular (fictitious) historical novelist named Fellowes Kraft. Only then does the reader — you, me, though maybe also Pierce — turn the page to find the adult Pierce some twenty-odd years later (I will hazard a guess at 1976, for reasons detailed further on).

Pierce is now a youngish university teacher of history and literature, a "gypsy scholar" wandered off from the 1960s' bright caravan of questing spirits and hapless pilgrims. He is between jobs, en route to an interview at a college in upstate New York, when his bus breaks down and leaves him stranded in a small village, in sight of a fair prospect in the Faraway Hills. There he unexpectedly runs into an old hippie friend. The friend invites Pierce to stay on with him in the Faraway Hills, rather than to wait for the next bus, and Pierce agrees.

A whole lot of stuff happens.

Among other things, over the course of the following years, and through the first three novels, Pierce (who is the same age as John Crowley) proposes to write a book (which resembles *Ægypt*) that is a sort of alternate history of our world,

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a book "that would have an even bigger story inside it. About history. About truth."

> "See," he said, "when I was a kid I thought or imagined that there was a country — Ægypt — which was like Egypt but different from it, underlying it or sort of superimposed on it. It was a real place to me, as real as America...."

Pierce's decision to remain in the Faraway Hills unexpectedly leads him to embark upon a quest — a true quest, as any great artistic endeavor is — when he becomes amanuensis for the dead novelist Fellowes Kraft, whose last, seemingly unfinished manuscript is entrusted to Pierce by Kraft's friend and literary executor, Boney Rassmussen. In taking on this task, Pierce becomes close to Boney's great-niece, Rosie. He becomes romantically involved with another Rose (there is also a third, hidden Rose), with whom he practices a form of erotic magic involving bondage (rituals which are mentioned in association with Giordano Bruno in *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, by the late Romanian scholar and adept Ioan Culianu, a friend of Crowley's).

Pierce's research ranges across time and space, and in and out of the works of Fellowes Kraft, whose fictionalized histories of John Dee and Giordano Bruno begin to have unsettling resonances with Pierce's own experiences and those of his antic, sometimes eerie friends and lovers in the Faraway Hills. Pierce has a sort of breakdown near the end of book three, complete with what may or may not be hallucinations; he has already conjured up spirits and lovers, human and animal, and had an encounter with a masked figure who rather resembles John Crowley.

As this synopsis probably makes clear, Ægypt is a work of mind-spinning complexity. The reader grows confused sometimes, trying to keep it all straight, and in its opening chapters, *Endless Things* seems to have perhaps dizzied its author too. There is a necessary but rather maddening recap, not so much of the vast work's plot but of its symbolic and philosophical underpinnings, including a concise history of the origins of Rosicrucianism that made me think longingly of the old *National Lampoon* parody of same.

But once one has dutifully followed Pierce across Europe, retracing the footsteps and hoof prints of

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Fellowes Kraft and Giordano Bruno, among others, *Endless Things* wondrously takes flight in a manner that, while not entirely unexpected, is still surprising and, in its final pages, almost unbearably moving.

Harold Bloom named *Ægypt* "my favorite romance (to give its true genre) after *Little, Big*," the latter book being the one that Crowley's reputation, until now, has rested upon in the minds of most readers and critics. I will be surprised if that doesn't change with the publication of the completed *Ægypt*, which seems to me to be one of the great literary achievements of our time. The book it most resembles is not a *A Dance to the Music of Time* or *The Alexandria Quartet*, books it's often compared with; but Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*. Subtitled "A historical grammar of poetic myth," Graves's masterpiece is a brilliant poetic work, a remarkable book if viewed as fiction; but a shoddy, often daft, and undeniably subjective piece of scholarship.

Whereas *Ægypt*, while purporting to be fiction, offers lucid and penetrating scholarly insights into all manner of Renaissance and classical thought and literature, in an allusive, elusive, discursive spiral dance that, in addition to the various writers already mentioned, embraces Shakespeare, Apuleius, Dante, Ovid; the Italian historian Carlo Ginsburg, and Dame Frances A. Yates, as well as the Bible, the Cabala, the Tarot; "A Pilgrim's Progress" and "The Romance of the Rose," with (I surmise) a shout-out to T. S. Eliot's "Four Quartets," wherein "the fire and the rose are one."

Near the beginning of *Endless Things*, Pierce ponders a Y, "A sign for human life, its form taken from crossroads and treeforks and the springing of arches." Y, of course, is also a question, the question, and Pierce's long journey is marked by countless divergences and countless questions, not just his own, but those of all the others whose lives mirror his, across time and history. Shortly before his bus breaks down on that fateful day in 1976, Pierce broods on the subject of three wishes; a subject on which he has spent a great deal of careful thought. His first two wishes "seemed airtight, clinker-built, foolproof to him, he had even recommended them to others, like standard legal forms." Wish Number One is for safety and health (physical, mental, long-lived) for himself and his loved ones; Wish Number Two for a guaranteed, not onerously obtained

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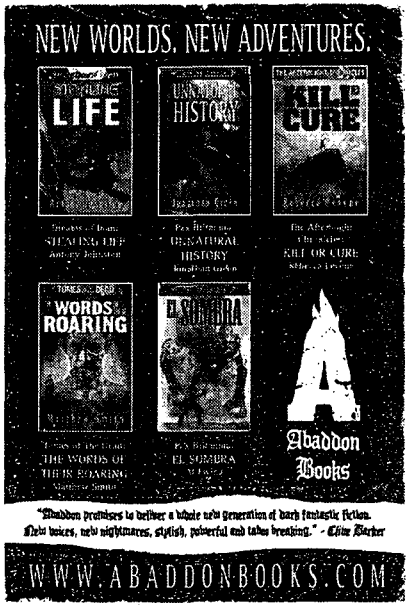
income. Wish Number Three — "the odd one, the rogue wish" — is more difficult to decide upon, though Pierce half-heartedly considers a sensible, seemingly dull option. It is this wish, perversely in the spirit of both careless wishes and impish spells, from Midas's to Puck's, that ultimately comes to pass.

Because while Ægypt is all about memory, it is also about forgetting, and dreaming. Not dreaming in the strictly biological sense but dreaming as in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and its literary cognate, Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*; the dream-theater Tolkien explicates in his essay "On Fairy-Stories," where he writes that

> If you are present at a Faerian drama you yourself are, or think that you are, bodily inside its Secondary World. The experience may be very similar to Dreaming and has (it would seem) sometimes (by men) been confounded with it. But in Faerian drama you are in a dream that some other mind is weaving, and the knowledge of that alarming fact may slip from your grasp."

Little, Big, Crowley's exquisite 1981 fantasy about a young man who marries into a faerie family, is (among many other things) an homage to Lewis Carroll's Alice books. As one treads deeper and deeper into Ægypt's labyrinth, Pierce, the clue at its center, evokes Looking-Glass World's sleeping Red King and also Alice, who wonders who has been dreamed into being, herself or the King? Like Smokey Barnable, the Protagonist of *Little, Big*, Pierce finds himself with a role to play in a sacred wedding; he is both foolish and beloved, asinine and the owner of wisdom hard-won, a limner immured in the process of transformation.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The year in which John Dee has the angelic vision that opens *Ægypt*, 1582, is the same year in which Giordano Bruno wrote a play called *Il Candelajo*, "The Chandler" or candle-maker. Bruno was thirty-four, the same age I suspect Pierce is when he is stranded in the Faraway Hills. Eighteen years later, in 1600, Bruno was burned at the stake in Rome for heresy, after having spent eight years in an underground dungeon, although the history Crowley creates around him allows for other possibilities; infinite ones.

> "Behold in the candle borne by this Chandler, to whom I give birth, that which shall clarify certain shadows of ideas," Bruno writes in his play.
>
> "I need not instruct you of my belief. Time gives all and takes all away; everything changes but nothing perishes. One only is immutable, eternal and ever endures, one and the same with itself. With this philosophy my spirit grows, my mind expands. Whereof, however obscure the night may be, I await the daybreak."

The great winds of Change and Time blow through Ægypt as they do our world; they fan the blaze of Giordano Bruno's pyre but don't extinguish his alchemical flame, which burns on in Fellowes Kraft and Pierce Moffett and, I daresay, John Crowley himself. At the end of *Endless Things*, Pierce Moffett finds himself in a place not unlike Little Gidding, his vision like ours expanded so that it can encompass an entire world and its history in an eyeblink, past and future transformed into an eternal present through the alchemy of the word. *Ægypt* is a metamorphosis, a metensomatosis, a memory play and a meta-novel; a story about many stories, a book with a larger book inside it. The further in you go, the bigger it gets.

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Mr. Shepard's most recent book is a new novel, Softspoken. *A "Best of Lucius Shepard" collection is currently in formative stages and the preliminary list of contents includes this new novella, a tale of life and love in Pennsylvania. Mr. Shepard himself says this story is informed by the author's decade-long journey through the outlying precincts of the music business, a time he now views as a kind of affliction.*

Stars Seen Through Stone

By Lucius Shepard

I WAS SMOKING A JOINT ON the steps of the public library when a cold wind blew in from no cardinal point, but from the top of the night sky, a force of pure perpendicularity that bent the sparsely leaved boughs of the old alder shadowing the steps straight down toward the Earth, as if a gigantic someone directly above were pursing his lips and aiming a long breath directly at the ground. For the duration of that gust, fifteen or twenty seconds, my hair did not flutter but was pressed flat to the crown of my head and the leaves and grass and weeds on the lawn also lay flat. The phenomenon had a distinct border — leaves drifted along the sidewalk, testifying that a less forceful, more fitful wind presided beyond the perimeter of the lawn. No one else appeared to notice. The library, a blunt nineteenth century relic of undressed stone, was not a popular point of assembly at any time of day, and the sole potential witness apart from myself was an elderly gentleman who was hurrying toward McGuigan's Tavern at a pace that implied a severe alcohol dependency. This happened seven months prior to the events central to this story, but I offer it to

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suggest that a good deal of strangeness goes unmarked by the world (at least by the populace of Black William, Pennsylvania), and, when taken in sum, such occurrences may be evidence that strangeness is visited upon us with some regularity and we only notice its extremes.

Ten years ago, following my wife's graduation from Yale Law, we set forth in our decrepit Volvo, heading for northern California, where we hoped to establish a community of sorts with friends who had moved to that region the previous year. We chose to drive on blue highways for their scenic value and decided on a route that ran through Pennsylvania's Bittersmith Hills, knuckled chunks of coal and granite, forested with leafless oaks and butternut, ash and elder, that — under heavy snow and threatening skies — composed an ominous prelude to the smoking redbrick town nestled in their heart. As we approached Black William, the Volvo began to rattle, the engine died, and we coasted to a stop on a curve overlooking a forbidding vista: row houses the color of dried blood huddled together along the wend of a sluggish, dark river (the Polozny), visible through a pall of gray smoke that settled from the chimneys of a sprawling prisonlike edifice — also of brick — on the opposite shore. The Volvo proved to be a total loss. Since our funds were limited, we had no recourse other than to find temporary housing and take jobs so as to pay for a new car in which to continue our trip. Andrea, whose specialty was labor law, caught on with a firm involved in fighting for the rights of embattled steelworkers. I hired on at the mill, where I encountered three part-time musicians lacking a singer. This led to that, that to this, Andrea and I grew apart in our obsessions, had affairs, divorced, and, before we realized it, the better part of a decade had rolled past. Though initially I felt trapped in an ugly, dying town, over the years I had developed an honest affection for Black William and its citizens, among whom I came to number myself.

After a brief and perhaps illusory flirtation with fame and fortune, my band broke up, but I managed to build a home recording studio during its existence and this became the foundation of a career. I landed a small business grant and began to record local bands on my own label, Soul Kiss Records. Most of the CDs I released did poorly, but in my third year of operation, one of my projects, a metal group calling themselves Meanderthal, achieved a regional celebrity and I sold management rights and the masters for their first two albums to a major label. This success

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gave me a degree of visibility and my post office box was flooded with demos from bands all over the country. Over the next six years I released a string of minor successes and acquired an industry-wide reputation of having an eye for talent. It had been my immersion in the music business that triggered the events leading to my divorce and, while Andrea was happy for me, I think it galled her that I had exceeded her low expectations. After a cooling-off period, we had become contentious friends and whenever we met for drinks or lunch, she would offer deprecating comments about the social value of my enterprise, and about my girlfriend, Mia, who was nine years younger than I, heavily tattooed, and — in Andrea's words — dressed "like a color-blind dominatrix."

"You've got some work to do, Vernon," she said once. "You know, on the taste thing? It's like you traded me in for a Pinto with flames painted on the hood."

I stopped myself from replying that it wasn't I who had done the trading in. I understood her comments arose from the fact that she had regrets and that she was angry at herself: Andrea was an altruist and the notion that her renewed interest in me might be partially inspired by envy or venality caused her to doubt her moral legitimacy. She was attractive, witty, slender, with auburn hair and patrician features and a forthright poise that caused men in bars, watching her pass, to describe her as "classy." Older and wiser, able by virtue of the self-confidence I had gained to cope with her sharp tongue, I had my own regrets; but I thought we had moved past the point at which a reconciliation was possible and refrained from giving them voice.

In late summer of the year when the wind blew straight down, I listened to a demo sent me by one Joseph Stanky of McKeesport, Pennsylvania. Stanky billed himself as Local Profitt, Jr. and his music, postmodern deconstructed blues sung in a gravelly, powerful baritone, struck me as having cult potential. I called his house that afternoon and was told by his mother that "Joey's sleeping." That night, around three A.M., Stanky returned my call. Being accustomed to the tactless ways of musicians, I set aside my annoyance and said I was interested in recording him. In the course of our conversation, Stanky told me he was twenty-six, virtually penniless, and lived in his mother's basement, maintaining throughout a churlish tone that dimmed my enthusiasm. Nevertheless, I offered to pay

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his bus fare to Black William and to put him up during the recording process. Two days later, when he stepped off a bus at the Trailways station, my enthusiasm dimmed further. A more unprepossessing human would be difficult to imagine. He was short, pudgy, with skin the color of a new potato and so slump-shouldered that for a moment I thought he might be deformed. Stringy brown hair provided an unsightly frame for a doughy face with a bulging forehead and a wispy soul patch. His white T-shirt was spattered with food stains, a Jackson Pollack work-in-progress; the collar of his windbreaker was stiff with grime. Baggy chinos and a trucker wallet completed his ensemble. I knew this gnomish figure must be Stanky, but didn't approach until I saw him claim two guitar cases from the luggage compartment. When I introduced myself, instead of expressing gratitude or pleasure, he put on a pitiful expression and said in a wheedling manner, "Can you spot me some bucks for cigarettes, man? I ran out during the ride."

I advanced him another hundred, with which he purchased two cartons of Camel Lights and a twelve-pack of Coca-Cola Classic (these, I learned, were basic components of his nutrition and, along with Quaker Instant Grits, formed the bulk of his diet), and took a roundabout way home, thinking I'd give him a tour of the town where he would spend the next few weeks. Stanky displayed no interest whatsoever in the mill, the Revolutionary War-era Lutheran Church, or Garnant House (home of the town's founding father), but reacted more positively to the ziggurat at the rear of Garnant house, a corkscrew of black marble erected in eccentric tribute to the founding father's wife, Ethelyn Garnant, who had died in childbirth; and when we reached the small central park where stands the statue of her son, Stanky said, "Hey, that's decent, man!" and asked me to stop the car.

The statue of William Garnant had been labeled an eyesore by the Heritage Committee, a group of women devoted to preserving our trivial past, yet they were forced to include it in their purview because it was the town's most recognizable symbol — gift shops sold replica statuettes and the image was emblazoned on coffee mugs, post cards, paperweights, on every conceivable type of souvenir. Created in the early 1800s by Gunter Hahn, the statue presented Black William in age-darkened bronze astride a rearing stallion, wearing a loose-fitting shirt and tight trousers, gripping

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the reins with one hand, pointing toward the library with the other, his body twisted and head turned in the opposite direction, his mouth open in — judging by his corded neck — a cry of alarm, as if he were warning the populace against the dangers of literacy. Hahn did not take his cues from the rather sedentary monuments of his day, but (impossibly) appeared to have been influenced by the work of heroic comic book artists such as Jim Steranko and Neal Adams, and thus the statue had a more fluid dynamic than was customary...or perhaps he was influenced by Black William himself, for it was he who had commissioned the sculpture and overseen its construction. This might explain the figure's most controversial feature, that which had inspired generations of high school students to highlight it when they painted the statue after significant football victories: Thanks to an elevated position in the saddle, Black William's crotch was visible, and — whether intended or an inadvertency, an error in the casting process that produced an unwanted rumple in the bronze — it seems that he possessed quite a substantial package. It always gladdened my heart to see the ladies of the Heritage Committee, embarked upon their annual spring clean-up, scrubbing away with soap and rags at Black William's genital pride.

I filled Stanky in on Black William's biography, telling him that he had fought with great valor in the Revolutionary War, but had not been accorded the status of hero, this due to his penchant for executing prisoners summarily, even those who had surrendered under a white flag. Following the war, he returned home in time to watch his father, Alan Garnant, die slowly and in agony. It was widely held that William had poisoned the old man. Alan resented the son for his part in Ethelyn's death and had left him to be raised by his slaves, in particular by an immense African man to whom he had given the name Nero. Little is known of Nero; if more were known, we might have a fuller understanding of young William, who — from the war's end until his death in 1808 — established a reputation for savagery, his specialities being murder and rape (both heterosexual and homosexual). By all accounts, he ruled the town and its environs with the brutal excess of a feudal duke. He had a coterie of friends who served as his loyal protectors, a group of men whose natures he had perverted, several of whom failed to survive his friendship. Accompanied by Nero, they rode roughshod through the countryside, terrorizing and

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defiling, killing anyone who sought to impede their progress. Other than that, his legacy consisted of the statue, the ziggurat, and a stubby tower of granite block on the bluff overlooking the town, long since crumbled into ruin.

Stanky's interest dwindled as I related these facts, his responses limited to the occasional "Cool," a word he pronounced as if it had two syllables, but before we went on our way he asked, "If the guy was such a bastard, how come they named the town after him?"

"It was a P.R. move," I explained. "The town was incorporated as Garnantsburgh. They changed it after World War Two. The city council wanted to attract business to the area and they hoped the name Black William would be more memorable. Church groups and the old lady vote, pretty much all the good Christians, they disapproved of the change, but the millworkers got behind it. The association with a bad guy appealed to their self-image."

"Looks like the business thing didn't work out. This place is deader than McKeesport." Stanky raised up in the seat to scratch his ass. "Let's go, okay? I couldn't sleep on the bus. I need to catch up on my Zs."

MY HOUSE was one of the row houses facing the mill, the same Andrea and I had rented when we first arrived. I had since bought the place. The ground floor I used for office space, the second floor for the studio, and I lived on the third. I had fixed up the basement, formerly Andrea's office, into a musician-friendly apartment — refrigerator, stove, TV, etc. — and that is where I installed Stanky. The bus ride must have taken a severe toll. He slept for twenty hours.

After three weeks I recognized that Stanky was uncommonly gifted and it was going to take longer to record him than I had presumed — he kept revealing new facets of his talent and I wanted to make sure I understood its full dimension before getting too deep into the process. I also concluded that although musicians do not, in general, adhere to an exacting moral standard, he was, talent aside, the most worthless human being I had ever met. Like many of his profession, he was lazy, irresponsible, untrustworthy, arrogant, slovenly, and his intellectual life consisted of comic books and TV. To this traditional menu of character flaws,

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I would add "deviant." The first inkling I had of his deviancy was when Sabela, the Dominican woman who cleaned for me twice a week, complained about the state of the basement apartment. Since Sabela never complained, I had a look downstairs. In less than a week, he had trashed the place. The garbage was overflowing and the sink piled high with scummy dishes and pots half-full of congealed grits; the floors covered in places by a slurry of cigarette ash and grease, littered with candy wrappers and crumpled Coke cans. A smell compounded of spoilage, bad hygiene, and sex seemed to rise from every surface. The plastic tip of a vibrator peeked out from beneath his grungy sheets. I assured Sabela I'd manage the situation, whereupon she burst into tears. I asked what else was troubling her and she said, "Mister Vernon, I no want him."

My Spanish was poor, Sabela's English almost nonexistent, but after a few minutes I divined that Stanky had been hitting on her, going so far as to grab at her breasts. This surprised me — Sabela was in her forties and on the portly side. I told her to finish with the upstairs and then she could go home. Stanky returned from a run to the 7-11 and scuttled down to the basement, roachlike in his avoidance of scrutiny. I found him watching *Star Trek* in the dark, remote in one hand, *TV Guide* (he called it "The Guide") resting on his lap, gnawing on a Butterfinger. Seeing him so at home in his filthy nest turned up the flame under my anger.

"Sabela refuses to clean down here," I said. "I don't blame her."

"I don't care if she cleans," he said with a truculent air.

"Well, I do. You've turned this place into a shithole. I had a metal band down here for a month, it never got this bad. I want you to keep it presentable. No stacks of dirty dishes. No crud on the floor. And put your damn sex toys in a drawer. Understand?"

He glowered at me.

"And don't mess with Sabela," I went on. "When she wants to clean down here, you clear out. Go up to the studio. I hear about you groping her again, you can hump your way back to McKeesport. I need her one hell of a lot more than I need you."

He mutttered something about "another producer."

"You want another producer? Go for it! No doubt major labels are beating down my door this very minute, lusting after your sorry ass."

Stanky fiddled with the remote and lowered his eyes, offering me a

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look at his infant bald spot. Authority having been established, I thought I'd tell him what I had in mind for the next weeks, knowing that his objections — given the temper of the moment — would be minimal; yet there was something so repellent about him, I still wanted to give him the boot. I had the idea that one of Hell's lesser creatures, a grotesque, impotent toad, banished by the Powers of Darkness, had landed with a foul stink on my sofa. But I've always been a sucker for talent and I felt sorry for him. His past was plain. Branded as a nerd early on and bullied throughout high school, he had retreated into a life of flipping burgers and getting off on a four-track in his mother's basement. Now he had gravitated to another basement, albeit one with a more hopeful prospect and a better recording system.

"Why did you get into music?" I asked, sitting beside him. "Women, right? It's always women. Hell, I was married to a good-looking woman, smart, sexy, and that was my reason."

He allowed that this had been his reason as well.

"So how's that working out? They're not exactly crawling all over you, huh?"

He cut his eyes toward me and it was as if his furnace door had slid open a crack, a blast of heat and resentment shooting out. "Not great," he said.

"Here's what I'm going to do." I tapped out a cigarette from his pack, rolled it between my fingers. "Next week, I'm bringing in a drummer and a bass player to work with you. I own a part-interest in the Crucible, the alternative club in town. As soon as you get it together, we'll put you in there for a set and showcase you for some people."

Stanky started to speak, but I beat him to the punch. "You follow my lead, you do what I know you can...," I said, leaving a significant pause. "I guarantee you won't be going home alone."

He waited to hear more, he wanted to bask in my vision of his future, but I knew I had to use rat psychology; now that I had supplied a hit of his favorite drug, I needed to buzz him with a jolt of electricity.

"First off," I said, "we're going to have to get you into shape. Work off some of those man-tits."

"I'm not much for exercise."

"That doesn't come as a shock," I said. "Don't worry. I'm not going

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to make a new man out of you, I just want to make you a better act. Eat what I eat for a month or so, do a little cardio. You'll drop ten or fifteen pounds." Falsely convivial, I clapped him on the shoulder and felt a twinge of disgust, as if I had touched a hypo-allergenic cat. "The other thing," I said. "That Local Proffit Junior name won't fly. It sounds too much like a country band."

"I like it," he said defiantly.

"If you want the name back later, that's up to you. For now, I'm billing you as Joe Stanky."

I laid the unlit cigarette on the coffee table and asked what he was watching, thinking that, for the sake of harmony, I'd bond with him a while.

"*Trek* marathon," he said.

We sat silently, staring at the flickering black-and-white picture. My mind sang a song of commitments, duties, other places I could be. Stanky laughed, a cross between a wheeze and a hiccup.

"What's up?" I asked.

"John Colicos sucks, man!"

He pointed to the screen, where a swarthy man with Groucho Marx eyebrows, pointy sideburns, and a holstered ray gun seemed to be undergoing an agonizing inner crisis. "Michael Ansara's the only real Vulcan." Stanky looked at me as if seeking validation. "At least," he said, anxious lest he offend, "on the original *Trek*."

Absently, I agreed with him. My mind rejoined its song. "Okay," I said, and stood. "I got things to do. We straight about Sabela? About keeping the place...you know? Keeping the damage down to normal levels?"

He nodded.

"Okay. Catch you later."

I started for the door, but he called to me, employing that wheedling tone with which I had become all too familiar. "Hey, Vernon?" he said. "Can you get me a trumpet?" This asked with an imploring expression, screwing up his face like a child, as if he were begging me to grant a wish.

"You play the trumpet?"

"Uh-huh."

"If you promise to take care of it. Yeah, I can get hold of one."

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Stanky rocked forward on the couch and gave a tight little fist-pump. "Decent!"

I DON'T KNOW when Stanky and I got married, but it must have been sometime between the incident with Sabela and the night Mia went home to her mother. Certainly my reaction to the latter was more restrained than was my reaction to the former, and I attribute this in part to our union having been joined. It was a typical rock-and-roll marriage: talent and money making beautiful music together and doomed from the start, on occasion producing episodes in which the relationship seemed to be crystallized, allowing you to see (if you wanted to) the messy bed you had made for yourself.

Late one evening, or maybe it wasn't so late — it was starting to get dark early — Mia came downstairs and stepped into my office and set a smallish suitcase on my desk. She had on a jacket with a fake fur collar and hood, tight jeans, and her nice boots. She'd put a fresh rasberry streak in her black hair and her makeup did a sort of Nefertiti-meets-Liza thing. All I said was, "What did I do this time?"

Mia's lips pursed in a moue — it was her favorite expression and she used it at every opportunity, whether appropriate or not. She became infuriated whenever I caught her practicing it in the bathroom mirror.

"It's not what you did," she said. "It's that clammy little troll in the basement."

"Stanky?"

"Do you have another troll? Stanky! God, that's the perfect name for him." Another moue. "I'm sick of him rubbing up against me."

Mia had, as she was fond of saying, "been through some stuff," and, if Stanky had done anything truly objectionable, she would have dealt with him. I figured she needed a break or else there was someone in town with whom she wanted to sleep.

"I take it this wasn't consensual rubbing," I said.

"You think you're so funny! He comes up behind me in tight places. Like in the kitchen. And he pretends he has to squeeze past."

"He's in our kitchen?"

"You send him up to use the treadmill, don't you?"

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"Oh...right."

"And he has to get water from the fridge, doesn't he?"

I leaned back in the chair and clasped my hands behind my head. "You want me to flog him? Cut off a hand?"

"Would that stop it? Give me a call when he's gone, okay?"

"You know I will. Say hi to Mom."

A final moue, a moue that conveyed a *soupçon* of regret, but — more pertinently — made plain how much I would miss her spoonful of sugar in my coffee.

After she had gone, I sat thinking nonspecific thoughts, vague appreciations of her many virtues, then I handicapped the odds that her intricate makeup signaled an affair and decided just how pissed off to be at Stanky. I shouted downstairs for him to come join me and dragged him out for a walk into town.

A mile and a quarter along the Polozny, then up a steep hill, would bring you to the park, a triangular section of greenery (orange-and-brownery at that time of year) bordered on the east by the library, on the west by a row of brick buildings containing gentrifed shops, and, facing the point of the triangle, by McGuigan's. For me alone, it was a brisk half-hour walk; with Stanky in tow, it took an extra twenty minutes. He was not one to hide his discomfort or displeasure. He panted, he sagged, he limped, he sighed. His breathing grew labored. The next step would be his last. Wasn't it enough I forced him to walk three blocks to the 7-11? If his heart failed, drop his bones in a bucket of molten steel and ship his guitars home to McKeesport, where his mother would display them, necks crossed, behind the urn on the mantle.

These comments went unvoiced, but they were eloquently stated by his body language. He acted out every nuance of emotion, like a child showing off a new skill. Send him on an errand he considered important and he would give you his best White Rabbit, head down, hustling along on a matter of urgency to the Queen. Chastise him and he would play the penitent altar boy. When ill, he went with a hand clutching his stomach or cheek or lower back, grimacing and listless. His posturing was so pitifully false, it was disturbing to look at him. I had learned to ignore these symptoms, but I recognized the pathology that bred them — I had seen him, thinking himself unwatched, slumped on the couch, clicking

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the remote, the *Guide* spread across his lap, mired in the quicksand of depression, yet more arrogant than depressed, a crummy king forsaken by his court, desperate for admirers.

On reaching the library, I sat on a middle step and fingered out a fatty from my jacket pocket. Stanky collapsed beside me, exhausted by the Polozny Death March he had somehow survived. He flapped a hand toward McGuigan's and said, hopefully, "You want to get a beer?"

"Maybe later."

I fired up the joint.

"Hey!" Stanky said. "We passed a cop car on the hill, man."

"I smoke here all the time. As long as you don't flaunt it, nobody cares."

I handed him the joint. He cupped the fire in his palm, smoking furtively. It occurred to me that I wouldn't drink from the same glass as him — his gums were rotting, his teeth horribly decayed — but sharing a joint? What the hell. The air was nippy and the moon was hidden behind the alder's thick leaves, which had turned but not yet fallen. Under an arc lamp, the statue of Black William gleamed as if fashioned of obsidian.

"Looks like he's pointing right at us, huh?" said Stanky.

When I was good and stoned, once the park had crystallized into a Victorian fantasy of dark green lawns amid crisp shadows and fountaining shrubs, the storefronts beyond hiding their secrets behind black glass, and McGuigan's ornate sign with its ruby coat of arms appearing to occupy an unreal corner in the dimension next door, I said, "Mia went back to her mom's tonight. She's going to be there for a while."

"Bummer." He had squirreled away a can of Coke in his coat pocket, which he now opened.

"It's normal for us. Chances are she'll screw around on me a little and spend most of the time curled up on her mom's sofa, eating Cocoa Puffs out of the box and watching soaps. She'll be back eventually."

He had a swig of Coke and nodded.

"What bothers me," I said, "is the reason she left. Not the real reason, but the excuse she gave. She claims you've been touching her. Rubbing against her and making like it was an accident."

This elicited a flurry of protests and I-swear-to-Gods. I let him run down before I said, "It's not a big deal."

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"She's lying, man! I...."

"Whatever. Mia can handle herself. You cross the line with her, you'll be picking your balls up off the floor."

I could almost hear the gears grinding as he wondered how close he had come to being deballed.

"I want you to listen," I went on. "No interruptions. Even if you think I'm wrong about something. Deal?"

"Sure.... Yeah."

"Most of what I put out is garbage music. Meanderthal, Big Sissy, The Swimming Holes, Junk Brothers...."

"I love the Junk Brothers, man! They're why I sent you my demo."

I gazed at him sternly — he ducked his head and winced by way of apology.

"So rock-and-roll is garbage," I said. "It's disposable music. But once in a great while, somebody does something perfect. Something that makes the music seem indispensable. I think you can make something perfect. You may not ever get rock star money. I doubt you can be mainstreamed. The best you can hope for, probably, is Tom Waits money. That's plenty, believe me. I think you'll be huge in Europe. You'll be celebrated there. You've got a false bass that reminds me of Blind Willie Johnson. You write tremendous lyrics. That fractured guitar style of yours is unique. It's out there, but it's funky and people are going to love it. You have a natural appeal to punks and art rockers. To rock geeks like me. But there's one thing can stop you — that's your problem with women."

Not even this reference to his difficulties with Sabela and Mia could disrupt his rapt attentiveness.

"You can screw this up very easily," I told him. "You let that inappropriate touching thing of yours get out of hand, you *will* screw it up. You have to learn to let things come. To do that, you have to believe in yourself. I know you've had a shitty life so far, and your self-esteem is low. But you have to break the habit of thinking that you're getting over on people. You don't need to get over on them. You've got something they want. You've got talent. People will cut you a ton of slack because of that talent, but you keep messing up with women, their patience is going to run out. Now I don't know where all that music comes from, but it doesn't sound like it came from a basement. It's a gift. You have to start treating it like one."

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I asked him for a cigarette and lit up. Though I'd given variations of the speech dozens of times, I bought into it this time and I was excited.

"Ten days from now you'll be playing for a live audience," I said. "If you put in the work, if you can believe in yourself, you'll get all you want of everything. And that's how you do it, man. By putting in the work and playing a kick-ass set. I'll help any way I can. I'm going to do publicity, T-shirts...and I'm going to give them away if I have to. I'm going to get the word out that Joe Stanky is something special. And you know what? Industry people will listen, because I have a track record." I blew a smoke ring and watched it disperse. "These are things I won't usually do for a band until they're farther along, but I believe in you. I believe in your music. But you have to believe in yourself and you have to put in the work."

I'm not sure how much of my speech, which lasted several minutes more, stuck to him. He acted inspired, but I couldn't tell how much of the act was real; I knew on some level he was still running a con. We cut across the park, detouring so he could inspect the statue again. I glanced back at the library and saw two white lights shaped like fuzzy asterisks. At first I thought they were moving across the face of the building, that some people were playing with flashlights; but their brightness was too sharp and erratic, and they appeared to be coming from behind the library, shining through the stone, heading toward us. After ten or fifteen seconds, they faded from sight. Spooked, I noticed that Stanky was staring at the building and I asked if he had seen the lights.

"That was weird, man!" he said. "What was it?"

"Swamp gas. UFOs. Who knows?"

I started walking toward McGuigan's and Stanky fell in alongside me. His limp had returned.

"After we have those beers, you know?" he said.

"Yeah?"

"Can we catch a cab home?" His limp became exaggerated. "I think I really hurt my leg."

Part of the speech must have taken, because I didn't have to roust Stanky out of bed the next morning. He woke before me, ate his grits (I allowed him a single bowl each day), knocked back a couple of Diet Cokes

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(my idea), and sequestered himself in the studio, playing adagio trumpet runs and writing on the Casio. Later, I heard the band thumping away. After practice, I caught Geno, the drummer, on his way out the door, brought him into the office and asked how the music was sounding.

"It doesn't blow," he said.

I asked to him to clarify.

"The guy writes some hard drum parts, but they're tasty, you know. Tight."

Geno appeared to want to tell me more, but spaced and ran a beringed hand through his shoulderlength black hair. He was a handsome kid, if you could look past the ink, the brands, and the multiple piercings. An excellent drummer and reliable. I had learned to be patient with him.

"Over all," I said, "how do you think the band's shaping up?"

He looked puzzled. "You heard us."

"Yes. I know what I think. I'm interested in what you think."

"Oh...okay." He scratched the side of his neck, the habitat of a red and black Chinese tiger. "It's very cool. Strong. I never heard nothing like it. I mean, it's got jazz elements, but not enough to where it doesn't rock. The guy sings great. We might go somewhere if he can control his weirdness."

I didn't want to ask how Stanky was being weird, but I did.

"He and Jerry got a conflict," Geno said. "Jerry can't get this one part down, and Stanky's on him about it. I keep telling Stanky to quit ragging him. Leave Jerry alone and he'll stay on it until he can play it backward. But Stanky, he's relentless and Jerry's getting pissed. He don't love the guy, anyway. Like today, Stanky cracks about we should call the band Stanky and Our Gang,"

"No," I said.

"Yeah, right. But it was cute, you know. Kind of funny. Jerry took it personal, though. He like to got into it with Stanky."

"I'll talk to them. Anything else?"

"Naw. Stanky's a geek, but you know me. The music's right and I'm there."

The following day I had lunch scheduled with Andrea. It was also the day that my secretary, Kiwanda, a petite Afro-American woman in her late twenties, came back to work after a leave during which she had been taking care of her grandmother. I needed an afternoon off — I thought I'd

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visit friends, have a few drinks — so I gave over Stanky into her charge, warning her that he was prone to getting handsy with the ladies.

"I'll keep that in mind," she said, sorting through some new orders. "You go have fun."

Andrea had staked out one of the high-backed booths at the rear of McGuigan's and was drinking a martini. She usually ran late, liked sitting at the front, and drank red wine. She had hung her jacket on the hook at the side of the booth and looked fetching in a cream-colored blouse. I nudged the martini glass and asked what was up with the booze.

"Bad day in court. I had to ask for a continuance. So...." She hoisted the martini. "I'm boozing it up."

"Is this that pollution thing?"

"No, it's a pro bono case."

"Thought you weren't going to do any pro bono work for a while."

She shrugged, drank. "What can I say?"

"All that class guilt. It must be tough." I signaled a waitress, pointed to Andrea's martini and held up two fingers. "I suppose I should be grateful. If you weren't carrying around that guilt, you would have married Snuffy Huffington the Third or somebody."

"Let's not banter," Andrea said. "We always banter. Let's just talk. Tell me what's going on with you."

I was good at reading Andrea, but it was strange how well I read her at that moment. Stress showed in her face. Nervousness. Both predictable components. But mainly I saw a profound loneliness and that startled me. I'd never thought of her as being lonely. I told her about Stanky, the good parts, his writing, his musicianship.

"The guy plays everything," I said. "Guitar, flute, sax, trumpet. Little piano, little drums. He's like some kind of mutant they produced in a secret high school band lab. And his voice. It's the Jim Nabors effect. You know, the guy who played Gomer Pyle? Nobody expected a guy looked that goofy could sing, so when he did, they thought he was great, even though he sounded like he had sinus trouble. It's the same with Stanky, except his voice really is great."

"You're always picking up these curious strays," she said. "Remember the high school kid who played bass, the one who fainted every time he was under pressure? Brian Something. You'd come upstairs and say,

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'You should see what Brian did,' and tell me he laid a bass on its side and played Mozart riffs on it. And I'd go...."

"Bach," I said.

"And I'd go, 'Yeah, but he faints!'" She laughed. "You always think you can fix them."

"You're coming dangerously close to banter," I said.

"You owe me one." She wiggled her forefinger and grinned. "I'm right, aren't I? There's a downside to this guy."

I told her about Stanky's downside and, when I reached the part about Mia leaving, Andrea said, "The circus must be in town."

"Now you owe me one."

"You can't expect me to be reasonable about Mia." She half-sang the name, did a little shimmy, made a moue.

"That's two you owe me," I said.

"Sorry." She straightened her smile. "You know she'll come back. She always does."

I liked that she was acting flirty and, though I had no resolution in mind, I didn't want her to stop.

"You don't have to worry about me," she said. "Honest."

"Huh?"

"So how talented is this Stanky? Give me an example."

"What do you mean, I don't have to worry about you?"

"Never mind. Now come on! Give me some Stanky."

"You want me to sing?"

"You were a singer, weren't you? A pretty good one, as I recall."

"Yeah, but I can't do what he does."

She sat expectantly, hands folded on the tabletop.

"All right," I said. I did a verse of "Devil's Blues," beginning with the lines:

> "There's a grapevine in heaven,
> There's a peavine in hell,
> One don't grow grapes,
> The other don't grow peas as well...."

I sailed on through to the chorus, getting into the vocal:

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"Devil's Blues!
God owes him...."

A bald guy popped his head over the top of an adjacent booth and looked at me, then ducked back down. I heard laughter.

"That's enough," I said to Andrea.

"Interesting," she said. "Not my cup of tea, but I wouldn't mind hearing him."

"He's playing the Crucible next weekend."

"Is that an invitation?"

"Sure. If you'll come."

"I have to see how things develop at the office. Is a tentative yes okay?"

"Way better than a firm no," I said.

We ordered from the grill and, after we had eaten, Andrea called her office and told them she was taking the rest of the day. We switched from martinis to red wine, and we talked, we laughed, we got silly, we got drunk. The sounds of the bar folded around us and I started to remember how it felt to be in love with her. We wobbled out of McGuigan's around four o'clock. The sun was lowering behind the Bittersmiths, but shed a rich golden light; it was still warm enough for people to be sitting in sweaters and shirts on park benches under the orange leaves.

Andrea lived around the corner from the bar, so I walked her home. She was weaving a little and kept bumping into me. "You better take a cab home," she said, and I said, "I'm not the one who's walking funny," which earned me a punch in the arm. When we came to her door, she turned to me, gripping her briefcase with both hands and said, "I'll see you next weekend, maybe."

"That'd be great."

She hovered there a second longer and then she kissed me. Flung her arms about my neck, clocking me with the briefcase, and gave me a one-hundred-percent all-Andrea kiss that, if I were a cartoon character, would have rolled my socks up and down and levitated my hat. She buried her face in my neck and said, "Sorry. I'm sorry." I was going to say, For what?, but she pulled away in a hurry, appearing panicked, and fled up the stairs.

I nearly hit a parked car on the drive home, not because I was drunk,

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but because thinking about the kiss and her reaction afterward impaired my concentration. What was she sorry about? The kiss? Flirting? The divorce? I couldn't work it out, and I couldn't work out, either, what I was feeling. Lust, certainly. Having her body pressed against mine had fully engaged my senses. But there was more. Considerably more. I decided it stood a chance of becoming a mental health issue and did my best to put it from mind.

Kiwanda was busy in the office. She had the computers networking and was going through prehistoric paper files on the floor. I asked what was up and she told me she had devised a more efficient filing system. She had never been much of an innovator, so this unnerved me, but I let it pass and asked if she'd had any problems with my boy Stanky.

"Not so you'd notice," she said tersely.

From this, I deduced that there *had* been a problem, but I let that pass as well and went upstairs to the apartment. Walls papered with flyers and band photographs; a grouping of newish, ultra-functional Swedish furniture — I realized I had liked the apartment better when Andrea did the decorating, this despite the fact that interior design had been one of our bones of contention. The walls, in particular, annoyed me. I was being stared at by young men with shaved heads and flowing locks in arrogant poses, stupid with tattoos, by five or six bands that had tried to stiff me, by a few hundred bad-to-indifferent memories and a dozen good ones. Maybe a dozen. I sat on a leather and chrome couch (it was a showy piece, but uncomfortable) and watched the early news. George Bush, Iraq, the price of gasoline...Fuck! Restless, I went down to the basement.

Stanky was watching Comedy Central. *Mad TV*. Another of his passions. He was slumped on the couch, remote in hand, and had a Coke and a cigarette working, an ice pack clamped to his cheek. I had the idea the ice pack was for my benefit, so I didn't ask about it, but knew it must be connected to Kiwanda's attitude. He barely acknowledged my presence, just sat there and pouted. I took a chair and watched with him. At last he said, "I need a rhythm guitar player."

"I'm not going to hire another musician this late in the game."

He set down the ice pack. His cheek was red, but that might have been from the ice pack itself...although I thought I detected a slight puffiness. "I seriously need him," he said.

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"Don't push me on this."

"It's important, man! For this one song, anyway."

"What song?"

"A new one."

I waited and then said, "That's all you're going to tell me?"

"It needs a rhythm guitar."

This tubby little madman recumbent on my couch was making demands — it felt good to reject him, but he persisted.

"It's just one song, man," he said in full-on wheedle. "Please! It's a surprise."

"I don't like surprises."

"Come on! You'll like this one, I promise."

I told him I'd see what I could do, had a talk with him about Jerry, and the atmosphere lightened. He sat up straight, chortling at *Mad TV*, now and then saying, "Decent!," his ultimate accolade. The skits were funny and I laughed, too.

"I did my horoscope today," he said as the show went to commercial.

"Let me guess," I said. "You're a Cancer."

He didn't like that, but maintained an upbeat air. "I don't mean astrology, man. I use the *Guide.*" He slid the *TV Guide* across the coffee table, pointing out an entry with a grimy finger, a black-rimmed nail. I snatched it up and read:

"*King Creole*: *** Based on a Harold Robbins novel. A young man (Elvis Presley) with a gang background rises from the streets to become a rock-and-roll star. Vic Morrow. 1:30."

"Decent, huh!" said Stanky. "You try it. Close your eyes and stick your finger in on a random page and see what you get. I use the movie section in back, but some people use the whole programming section."

"Other people do this? Not just you?"

"Go ahead."

I did as instructed and landed on another movie:

"*A Man and a Woman*: **** A widow and a widower meet on holiday and are attracted to one another, but the woman backs off

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because memories of her dead husband are still too strong. Jean-Louis Trintignant, Anouk Aimée. 1:40."

Half-believing, I tried to understand what the entry portended for me and Andrea.

"What did you get?" asked Stanky.

I tossed the *Guide* back to him and said, "It didn't work for me."

I THOUGHT ABOUT CALLING Andrea, but business got in the way — I suppose I allowed it to get in the way, due to certain anxieties relating to our divorce. There was publicity to do, Kiwanda's new filing system to master (she kept on tweaking it), recording (we laid down two tracks for Stanky's first EP), and a variety of other duties. And so the days went quickly. Stanky began going to the library after every practice, walking without a limp; he said he was doing research. He didn't have enough money to get into trouble and I had too much else on my plate to stress over it. The night before he played the Crucible, I was in the office, going over everything in my mind, wondering what I had overlooked, thinking I had accomplished an impossible amount of work that week, when the doorbell rang. I opened the door and there on the stoop was Andrea, dressed in jeans and a bulky sweater, cheeks rosy from the night air. An overnight bag rested at her feet. "Hi," she said, and gave a chipper smile, like a tired Girl Scout determined to keep pimping her cookies.

Taken aback, I said, "Hi," and ushered her in.

She went into the office and sat in the wooden chair beside my desk. I followed her in, hesitated, and took a seat in my swivel chair.

"You look...rattled," she said.

"That about covers it. Good rattled. But rattled, nonetheless."

"I am, too. Sorta." She glanced around the office, as if noticing the changes. I could hear every ticking clock, every digital hum, all the discrete noises of the house.

She drew in breath, exhaled, clasped her hands in her lap. "I thought we could try," she said quietly. "We could do a trial period or something. Some days, a week. See how that goes." She paused. "The last few times I've seen you, I've wanted to be with you. And I think you've wanted to

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be with me. So...." She made a flippy gesture, as if she were trying to shade things toward the casual. "This seemed like an opportunity."

You would have thought, even given the passage of time, after all the recriminations and ugliness of divorce, some measure of negativity would have cropped up in my thoughts; but it did not and I said, "I think you're right."

"Whew!" Andrea pretended to wipe sweat from her brow and grinned.

An awkward silence; the grin flickered and died.

"Could I maybe go upstairs," she asked.

"Oh! Sure. I'm sorry." I had the urge to run up before her and rip down the crapfest on the wall, chuck all the furniture out the window, except for a mattress and candles.

"You're still rattled," she said. "Maybe we should have a drink before anything." She stretched out a hand to me. "Let's get good and drunk."

As it happened, we barely got the drinks poured before we found our groove and got busy. It was like old times, cozy and familiar, and yet it was like we were doing it for the first time, too. Every touch, every sensation, carried that odd *frisson*. We woke late, with the frost almost melted from the panes, golden light chuting through the high east windows, leaving the bed in a bluish shadow. We lay there, too sleepy to make love, playing a little, talking, her telling me how she had plotted her approach, me telling her how I was oblivious until that day at lunch when I noticed her loneliness, and what an idiot I had been not to see what was happening.... Trivial matters, but they stained a few brain cells, committing those moments to memory and marking them as Important, a red pin on life's map. And then we did make love, as gently as that violence can be made. Afterward, we showered and fixed breakfast. Watching her move about the kitchen in sweats and a T-shirt, I couldn't stop thinking how great this was, and I wanted to stop, to quit footnoting every second. I mentioned this as we ate and she said, "I guess that means you're happy."

"Yeah! Of course."

"Me, too." She stabbed a piece of egg with her fork, tipped her head to the side as if to get a better angle on me. "I don't know when it was I started to be able to read you so well. Not that you were that hard to read to begin with. It just seems there's nothing hidden in your face anymore."

"Maybe it's a case of heightened senses."

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"No, really. At times it's like I know what you're about to say."

"You mean I don't have to speak?"

She adopted the manner of a legal professional. "Unfortunately, no. You have to speak. Otherwise, it would be difficult to catch you in a lie."

"Maybe we should test this," I said. "You ask my name, and I'll say Helmut or Torin."

She shook her head. "I'm an organic machine, not a lie detector. We have different ways. Different needs."

"Organic. So that would make you...softer than your basic machine? Possibly more compliant?"

"Very much so," she said.

"You know, I think I may be reading you pretty well myself." I leaned across the table, grabbed a sloppy kiss, and, as I sat back down, I remembered something. "Damn!" I said, and rapped my forehead with my knuckles.

"What is it?"

"I forgot to take Stanky for his haircut."

"Can't he take care of it himself?"

"Probably not. You want to go with us? You might as well meet him. Get it over with."

She popped egg into her mouth and chewed. "Do we have to do it now?"

"No, he won't even be up for a couple of hours."

"Good," she said.

The Crucible, a concrete block structure on the edge of Black William, off beyond the row houses, had once been a dress outlet store. We had put a cafeteria in the front, where we served breakfast and lunch — we did a brisk business because of the mill. Separate from the cafeteria, the back half of the building was given over to a bar with a few ratty booths, rickety chairs, and tables. We had turned a high-school artist loose on the walls and she had painted murals that resembled scenes from J. R. R. Tolkien's lost labor-union novel. An immense crucible adorned the wall behind the stage; it appeared, thanks to the artist's inept use of perspective, to be spilling a flood of molten steel down upon an army of orc-like workers.

There was a full house that night, attracted by local legends The

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Swimming Holes, a girl band who had migrated to Pittsburgh, achieving a degree of national renown, and I had packed the audience with Friends of Vernon whom I had enjoined to applaud and shout wildly for Stanky. A haze of smoke fogged the stage lights and milling about were fake punks, the odd goth, hippies from Garnant College in Waterford, fifteen miles away: the desperate wannabe counter-culture of the western Pennsylvania barrens. I went into the dressing rooms, gave each Swimming Hole a welcome-home hug, and checked in on Stanky. Jerry, a skinny guy with buzzcut red hair, was plunking on his bass, and Geno was playing fills on the back of a chair; Ian, the rhythm guitarist, was making a cell call in the head. Stanky was on the couch, smoking a Camel, drinking a Coke, and watching the SciFi Channel. I asked if he felt all right. He said he could use a beer. He seemed calm, supremely confident, which I would not have predicted and did not trust. But it was too late for concern and I left him to God.

I joined Andrea at the bar. She had on an old long-sleeved Ramones shirt, the same that she had worn to gigs back when my band was happening. Despite the shirt, she looked out of place in the Crucible, a swan floating on a cesspool. I ordered a beer to be carried to Stanky, a shot of tequila for myself. Andrea put her mouth to my ear and shouted over the recorded music, "Don't get drunk!" and then something else that was lost in the din. I threw down the shot and led her into the cafeteria, which was serving coffee and soda to a handful of kids, some of whom appeared to be trying to straighten out. I closed the door to the bar, cutting the volume by half.

"What were you saying?" I asked.

"I said not to get drunk, I might have use for you later." She sat at the counter, patted the stool beside her, encouraging me to sit.

"They're about to start," I said, joining her. "I've only got a minute."

"How do you think it'll go?"

"With Stanky? I'm praying it won't be a disaster."

"You know, he didn't seem so bad this afternoon. Not like you described, anyway."

"You just like him because he said you were a babe."

I took a loose cigarette from my shirt pocket, rolled it between my thumb and forefinger, and she asked if I was smoking again.

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"Once in a while. Mainly I do this," I said, demonstrating my rolling technique. "Anyway...Stanky. You caught him on his best behavior."

"He seemed sad to me." She lifted a pepper shaker as she might a chess piece and set it closer to the salt. "Stunted. He has some adult mannerisms, adult information, but it's like he's still fourteen or fifteen."

"There you go," I said. "Now ask yourself how it would be, being around a twenty-six-year-old fourteen-year-old on a daily basis."

One of the kids, boys, men — there should be, I think, a specific word for someone old enough to die for his country, yet who can't grow a proper mustache and is having difficulty focusing because he recently ate some cheap acid cut with crank — one of the *guys* at the end of the counter, then, came trippingly toward us, wearing an army field jacket decorated with a braid of puke on the breast pocket, like a soggy service ribbon. He stopped to leer at Andrea, gave me the high sign, said something unintelligible, possibly profane, and staggered on into the club.

It had been Andrea's stance, when we were married, that episodes such as this were indicative of the sewer in which she claimed I was deliquescing, a.k.a. the music business. Though I had no grounds to argue the point, I argued nonetheless, angry because I hated the idea that she was smarter than I was — I compensated by telling myself I had more soul. There had been other, less defined reasons for anger, and the basic argument between us had gotten vicious. In this instance, however, she ignored the kid and returned to our conversation, which forced me to consider anew the question of my milieu and the degradation thereof, and to wonder if she had, by ignoring the kid, manipulated me into thinking that she had changed, whereas I had not, and it might be that the music business was to blame, that it had delimited me, warped and stunted my soul. I knew she was still the smart one.

The music cut off midsong and I heard Rudy Bowen, my friend and partner in the Crucible, on the mike, welcoming people and making announcements. On our way back into the club, Andrea stopped me at the door and said, "I love you, Vernon." She laid a finger on my lips and told me to think about it before responding, leaving me mightily perplexed.

Stanky walked out onto the stage of the Crucible in a baggy white T-shirt, baggy chinos and his trucker wallet. He would have been semi-presentable had he not also been wearing a battered top hat. Somebody

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hooted derisively, and that did not surprise me. The hat made him look clownish. I wanted to throw a bottle and knock it off his head. He began whispering into the mike. Another hoot, a piercing whistle. Not good. But the whisper evolved into a chant, bits of Latin, Spanish, rock-and-roll clichés, and nonsense syllables. Half-spoken, half-sung, with an incantatory vibe, scatted in a jump-blues rhythm that the band, coming in underneath the vocal, built into a sold groove, and then Stanky, hitting his mark like a ski jumper getting a lift off a big hill, began to sing:

"I heard the Holy Ghost moan...
Stars seen through stone..."

Basically, the song consisted of those two lines repeated, but sung differently — made into a gospel plaint, a rock-and-roll howl, a smooth Motown styling, a jazzy lilt, and so on. There was a break with more lyrics, but the two lines were what mattered. The first time he sang them, in that heavy false bass, a shock ripped through the audience. People looked up, they turned toward the stage, they stopped drinking, their heads twitched, their legs did impromptu dance steps. Stanky held the word "moan" out for three bars, working it like a soul singer, then he picked up the trumpet and broke into a solo that was angry like Miles, but kept a spooky edge. When he set the trumpet down, he went to singing the lyric double time, beating the top hat against his thigh, mangling it. The crowd surged forward, everyone wanting to get next to the stage, dancing in place, this strange, shuffling dance, voodoo zombies from hell, and Stanky strapped on his guitar. I missed much of what happened next, because Andrea dragged me onto the dance floor and started making slinky moves, and I lost my distance from the event. But Stanky's guitar work sent the zombies into a convulsive fever. We bumped into a punk who was jerking like his strings were being yanked; we did a threesome with a college girl whose feet were planted, yet was shaking it like a tribal dancer in a *National Geographic Special*; we were corralled briefly by two millworkers who were dancing with a goth girl, watching her spasm, her breasts flipping every which way. At the end of the song, Jerry and Geno started speaking the lyric into their mikes, adding a counterpoint to Stanky's vocal, cooling things off, bringing it down to the creepy chant again; then

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the band dropped out of the music and Stanky went a capella for a final repetition of his two lines.

Applause erupted, and it was as idiosyncratic as the dancing had been. This one guy was baying like a hound; a blond girl bounced up and down, clapping gleefully like a six-year-old. I didn't catch much of the set, other than to note the audience's positive response, in particular to the songs "Average Joe" and "Can I Get a Waitress?" and "The Sunset Side of You" — I was working the room, gathering opinions, trying to learn if any of the industry people I'd invited had come, and it wasn't until twenty minutes after the encore that I saw Stanky at the bar, talking to a girl, surrounded by a group of drunken admirers. I heard another girl say how cute he was and that gave me pause to wonder at the terrible power of music. The hooker I had hired to guarantee my guarantee, a long-legged brunette named Carol, dish-faced but with a spectacular body, was biding her time, waiting for the crowd around Stanky to disperse. He was in competent hands. I felt relief, mental fatigue, the desire to be alone with Andrea. There was no pressing reason to stay. I said a couple of good-byes, accepted congratulations, and we drove home, Andrea and I, along the Polozny.

"He's amazing," she said. "I have to admit, you may be right about him."

"Yep," I said proudly.

"Watch yourself, Sparky. You know how you get when these things start to go south."

"What are you talking about?"

"When one of your problem children runs off the tracks, you take it hard. That's all I'm saying." Andrea rubbed my shoulder. "You may want to think about speeding things up with Stanky. Walk him a shorter distance and let someone else deal with him. It might save you some wear and tear."

We drove in silence; the river widened, slowed its race, flowing in under the concrete lees of the mill; the first row house came up on the right. I was tempted to respond as usually I did to her advice, to say it's all good, I've got it under control, but for some reason I listened that night and thought about everything that could go wrong.

Carol was waiting for me in the office when I came downstairs at eight o'clock the following morning. She was sitting in my swivel chair, going

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through my Rolodex. She looked weary, her hair mussed, and displeased. "That guy's a freak," she said flatly. "I want two hundred more. And in the future, I want to meet the guys you set me up with before I commit."

"What'd he do?" I asked.

"Do you really want to know?"

"I'm kind of curious.... Yeah."

She began to recite a list of Stanky-esque perversion — I cut her off.

"Okay," I said, and reached for my checkbook. "He didn't get rough, did he?"

"*Au contraire.*" She crossed her legs. "He wanted me to...."

"Please," I said. "Enough."

"I don't do that sort of work," she said primly.

I told her I'd written the check for three hundred and she was somewhat mollified. I apologized for Stanky and told her I hadn't realized he was so twisted.

"We're okay," she said. "I've had...Hi, sweetie!"

She directed this greeting to a point above my shoulder as Andrea, sleepily scratching her head, wearing her sweats, entered the office. "Hi, Carol," she said, bewildered.

Carol hugged her, then turned to me and waved good-bye with my check. "Call me."

"Pretty early for hookers," Andrea said, perching on the edge of the desk.

"Let me guess. You defended her."

"Nope. One of her clients died and left her a little money. I helped her invest. But that begs the question, what was she doing here?"

"I got her for Stanky."

"A reward?"

"Something like that."

She nodded and idly kicked the back of her heel against the side of the desk. "How come you were never interested in the men I dated after we broke up?"

I was used to her sudden conversational U-turns, but I had expected her to interrogate me about Carol and this caught me off-guard. "I don't know. I suppose I didn't want to think about who you were sleeping with."

"Must be a guy thing. I always checked out your girlfriends. Even the

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ones you had when I was mad at you." She slipped off the desk and padded toward the door. "See you upstairs."

I spent the next two days between the phone and the studio, recording a good take of "The Sunset Side of You" — it was the closest thing Stanky had to a ballad, and I thought, with its easy, Dr. John-ish feel, it might get some play on college radio:

> "I'm gonna crack open my venetian blind
> and let that last bit of old orange glory shine,
> so I can catch an eyeful
> of my favorite trifle,
> my absoutely perfect point of view....
> That's an eastbound look,
> six inches from the crook
> of my little finger,
> at the sunset side of you...."

Stanky wasn't happy with me — he was writing a song a day, sometimes two songs, and didn't want to disrupt his creative process by doing something that might actually make money, but I gamed him into cutting the track.

Wednesday morning, I visited Rudy Bowen in his office. Rudy was an architect who yearned to be a cartoonist, but who had never met with much success in the latter pursuit, and the resonance of our creative failures, I believe, helped to cement our friendship. He was also the only person I knew who had caught a fish in the Polozny downstream from the mill. It occupied a place of honor in his office, a hideous thing mounted on a plaque, some sort of mutant trout nourished upon pollution. Whenever I saw it, I would speculate on what else might lurk beneath the surface of the cold, deep pools east of town, imagining telepathic monstrosities plated with armor like fish of the Mesozoic and frail tentacled creatures, their skins having the rainbow sheen of an oil slick, to whom mankind were sacred figures in their dream of life.

Rudy's secretary, a matronly woman named Gwen, told me he had gone out for a latte and let me wait in his private office. I stepped over to his drafting table, curious about what he was working on. Held in place on

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the table was a clean sheet of paper, but in a folder beside the table was a batch of new cartoons, a series featuring shadowy figures in a mineshaft who conversed about current events, celebrities, etc., while excavating a vein of pork that twisted through a mountain....This gave rise to the title of the strip: *Meat Mountain Stories.* They were silhouettes, really. Given identity by their shapes, eccentric hairstyles, and speech signatures. The strip was contemporary and hilarious — everything Rudy's usual work was not. In some frames, a cluster of tiny white objects appeared to be floating. Moths, I thought. Lights of some kind. They, too, carried on conversations, but in pictographs. I was still going through them when Rudy came in, a big, blond man with the beginnings of a gut and thick glasses that lent him a baffled look. Every time I saw him, he looked more depressed, more middle-aged.

"These are great, man!" I said. "They're new, right?"

He crossed the room and stood beside me.

"I been working on them all week. You like 'em, huh?"

"I love them. You did all this this week? You must not be sleeping." I pointed to the white things. "What're these?"

"Stars. I got the idea from that song Stanky did. 'Stars Seen Through Stone.'"

"So they're seeing them, the people in the mine?"

"Yeah. They don't pay much attention to them, but they're going to start interacting soon."

"It must be going around." I told him about Stanky's burst of writing, Kiwanda's adventures in office management.

"That's odd, you know." He sipped his latte. "It seems like there's been a real rash of creativity in town. Last week, some grunt at the mill came up with an improvement in the cold forming process that everybody says is a huge deal. Jimmy Galvin, that guy who does handyman work? He invented a new gardening tool. Bucky Bucklin's paying his patent fees. He says they're going to make millions. Beth started writing a novel. She never said anything to me about wanting to write, but she's hardly had time for the kids, she's been so busy ripping off the pages. It's not bad."

"Well, I wish I'd catch it," I said. "With me, it's same old same old. Drudgeree, drudgeroo. Except for Andrea's back."

"Andrea? You mean you guys are dating?"

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"I mean back as in back in my house. Living with me."

"Damn!" he said. "That's incredible!"

We sat in two chairs like two inverted tents on steel frames, as uncomfortable as my upstairs couch, and I told him about it.

"So it's going okay?" he asked.

"Terrific, I think. But what do I know? She said it was a trial period, so I could get home tonight and she might be gone. I've never been able to figure her out."

"Andrea. Damn! I saw her at the club, but I didn't realize she was with you. I just had time to wave." He leaned across the space between us and high-fived me. "Now maybe you'll stop going around like someone stole your puppy."

"It wasn't like that," I said.

He chuckled. "Naw. Which is why the people of Black William, when asked the date, often reply, 'Six years, two months, and twelve days since the advent of Vernon's Gloom.'"

We moved on to other topics, among them the club, business, and, as I made to leave, I gestured at Rudy's grotesque trophy and said, "While those creative juices are flowing, you ought to design a fishing lure, so I can watch you hook into the Loch Polozny Monster."

Rudy laughed and said, "Maybe if I have a couple of minutes. I'm going to keep working on the comic. Whatever this shit is, it's bound to go away."

I WAS FOOLING around in the studio one evening, ostensibly cleaning up the tape we'd rolled the previous weekend at the Crucible, hoping to get a live rendition of "Stars Seen Through Stone" clean enough for the EP, but I was, instead, going over a tape I'd made, trying to find some ounce of true inspiration in it, finding none, wondering why this wave of creativity — if it, indeed, existed — had blessed Rudy's house and not mine. It was after seven; Stanky was likely on his way home from the library, and I was thinking about seeing if Andrea wanted to go out, when she leaned in the doorway and asked if she was interrupting. I told her, no, not at all, and she came into the booth and sat next to me at the board, looking out at the drum kit, the instruments, the serpents' nest of power cords.

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"When we were married, I didn't get what you saw in this," she said. "All I saw was the damage, the depravity, the greed. Now I've been practicing, I realize there's more or less the same degree of damage and greed and depravity in every enterprise. You can't see it as clearly as you do in the music business, but it's there."

"Tell me what I see that's good."

"The music, the people."

"None of that lasts," I said. "All I am's a yo-yo tester. I test a thousand busted yo-yos, and occasionally I run across one that lights up and squeals when it spins."

"What I do is too depressing to talk about. It's rare when anyone I represent has a good outcome, even if they win. Corporations delay and delay."

"So it's disillusionment that's brought us together again."

"No." She looked at me steadily. "Do you love me?"

"Yeah, I love you. You know I do. I never stopped. There was a gap...."

"A big gap!"

"The gap made it more painful, but that's all it did."

She played with dials on the sound board, frowning as if they were refusing to obey her fingers.

"You're messing up my settings," I said.

"Oh...sorry."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's just you don't lie to me anymore. You used to lie all the time, even about trivial things. I'm having trouble adjusting."

I started to deny it, but recognized that I couldn't. "I was angry at you. I can't remember why, exactly. Lying was probably part of it."

"I was angry at you, too." She put her hands back on the board, but twisted no dials. "But I didn't lie to you."

"You stopped telling me the truth," I said.

"Same difference."

The phone rang; in reflex, I picked up and said, "Soul Kiss."

It was Stanky. He started babbling, telling me to come downtown quick.

"Whoa!" I said. "If this is about me giving you a ride..."

"No, I swear! You gotta see this, man! The stars are back!"

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"The stars."

"Like the one we saw at the library. The lights. You better come quick. I'm not sure how long it'll last."

"I'm kind of busy," I said.

"Dude, you have got to see this! I'm not kidding!"

I covered the phone and spoke to Andrea. "Want to ride uptown? Stanky says there's something we should see."

"Maybe afterward we could stop by my place and I could pick up a few things?"

I got back on the phone. "Where are you?"

Five minutes later we were cutting across the park toward the statue of Black William, beside which Stanky and several people were standing in an island of yellow light — I had no time to check them out, other than to observe that one was a woman, because Stanky caught my arm and directed me to look at the library and what I saw made me unmindful of any other sight. The building had been rendered insubstantial, a ghost of itself, and I was staring across a dark plain ranged by a dozen fuzzy white lights, some large, some small, moving toward us at a slow rate of speed, and yet perhaps it was not slow — the perspective seemed infinite, as if I were gazing into a depth that, by comparison to which, all previously glimpsed perspectives were so limited as to be irrelevant. As the lights approached, they appeared to vanish, passing out of frame, as if the viewing angle we had been afforded was too narrow to encompass the scope of the phenomenon. Within seconds, it began to fade, the library to regain its ordinary solidity, and I thought I heard a distant gabbling, the sound of many voices speaking at once, an army of voices (though I might have manufactured this impression from the wind gusting through the boughs); and then, as that ghostly image winked out of existence, a groaning noise that, in my opinion, issued from no fleshly throat, but may have been produced by some cosmic stress, a rip in the continuum sealing itself or something akin.

Andrea had at some point latched onto my arm, and we stood gaping at the library; Stanky and the rest began talking excitedly. There were three boys, teenagers, two of them carrying skateboards. The third was a pale, skinny, haughty kid, bespotted with acne, wearing a black turtleneck sweater, black jeans, black overcoat. They displayed a worshipful

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attitude toward Stanky, hanging on his every word. The woman might have been the one with whom Stanky had been speaking at the Crucible before Carol made her move. She was tiny, barely five feet tall, Italian-looking, with black hair and olive skin, in her twenties, and betrayed a compete lack of animation until Stanky slipped an arm around her; then she smiled, an expression that revealed her to be moderately attractive.

The skateboarders sped off to, they said, "tell everybody," and this spurred me to take out my cell phone, but I could not think who to call. Rudy, maybe. But no one in authority. The cops would laugh at the report. Stanky introduced us to Liz (the woman lowered her eyes) and Pin (the goth kid looked away and nodded). I asked how long the phenomenon had been going on before we arrived and Stanky said, "Maybe fifteen minutes."

"Have you seen it before?"

"Just that time with you."

I glanced up at Black William and thought that maybe he *had* intended the statue as a warning...though it struck me now that he was turning his head back toward the town and laughing.

Andrea hugged herself. "I could use something hot to drink."

McGuigan's was handy, but that would have disincluded Pin, who obviously was underage. I loaded him, Stanky, and Liz into the back of the van and drove to Szechuan Palace, a restaurant on the edge of the business district, which sported a five-foot-tall gilt fiberglass Buddha in the foyer that over the years had come to resemble an ogre with a skin condition, the fiberglass weave showing through in patches, and whose dining room (empty but for a bored wait-staff) was lit like a Macao brothel in lurid shades of red, green, and purple. On the way to the restaurant, I replayed the incident in my head, attempting to understand what I had witnessed not in rational terms, but in terms that would make sense to an ordinary American fool raised on science fiction and horror movies. Nothing seemed to fit. At the restaurant, Andrea and Pin ordered tea, Liz and Stanky gobbled moo shu pork and lemon chicken, and I picked at an egg roll. Pin started talking to Andrea in an adenoidal voice, lecturing her on some matter regarding Black William, and, annoyed because he was treating her like an idiot, I said, "What does Black William have to do with this?"

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"Not a thing," Pin said, turning on me a look of disdain that aspired to be the kind of look Truman Capote once fixed upon a reporter from the *Lincoln Journal-Star* who had asked if he was a homosexual. "Not unless you count the fact that he saw something similar two hundred years ago and it probably killed him."

"Pin's an expert on Black William," Stanky said, wiping a shred of pork from his chin.

"What little there is to know," said Pin grandly, "I know."

It figured that a Goth townie would have developed a crush on the local bogeyman. I asked him to enlighten me.

"Well," Pin said, "when Joey told me he'd seen a star floating in front of the library, I knew it *had* to be one of BW's stars. Where the library stands today used to be the edge of Stockton Wood, which had an evil reputation. As did many woods in those days, of course. Stockton Wood is where he saw the stars."

"What did he say about them?"

"He didn't say a thing. Nothing that he committed to paper, anyway. It's his younger cousin, Samuel Garnant, we can thank for the story. He wrote a memoir about BW's escapades under the *nom de plume* Jonathan Venture. According to Samuel, BW was in the habit of riding in the woods at twilight. 'Tempting the Devil,' he called it. His first sight of the stars was a few mysterious lights — like with you and Joey. He rode out into the wood the next night and many nights thereafter. Samuel's a bit vague on how long it was before BW saw the stars again. I'm guessing a couple of weeks, going by clues in the narrative. But eventually he did see them, and what he saw was a lot like what we just saw." Pin put his hands together, fingertips touching, like a priest preparing to address the Ladies Auxiliary. "In those days, people feared God and the Devil. When they saw something amazing, they didn't stand around like a bunch of doofuses saying, 'All right!' and taking pictures. BW was terrified. He said he'd seen the Star Wormwood and heard the Holy Ghost moan. He set about changing his life."

Stanky shot me one of his wincing, cutesy, embarrassed smiles — he had told me the song was completely original.

"For almost a year," Pin went on, "BW tried to be a good Christian. He performed charitable works, attended church regularly, but his heart

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wasn't in it. He lapsed back into his old ways and before long he took to riding in Stockton Woods again, with his manservant Nero walking at his side. He thought that he had missed an opportunity and told Samuel if he was fortunate enough to see the stars again, he would ride straight for them. He'd embrace their evil purpose."

"What you said about standing around like doofuses, taking pictures," Andrea said. "I don't suppose anyone got a picture?"

Pin produced a cell phone and punched up a photograph of the library and the stars. Andrea and I leaned in to see.

"Can you e-mail that to me?" I asked.

Pin said he could and I wrote my address on a napkin.

"So," Pin said. "The next time BW saw the stars was in eighteen-oh-eight. He saw them twice, exactly like the first time. A single star, then an interval of week or two and a more complex sighting. A month after that, he disappeared while riding with Nero in Stockon Wood and they were never seen again."

Stanky hailed our waitress and asked for more pancakes for his moo shu.

"So you think the stars appeared three times?" said Andrea. "And Black William missed the third appearance on the first go-round, but not on the second?"

"That's what Samuel thought," said Pin.

Stanky fed Liz a bite of lemon chicken.

"You're assuming Black William was killed by the stars, but that doesn't make sense," said Andrea. "For instance, why would there be a longer interval between the second and third sightings? If there *was* a third sighting. It's more likely someone who knew the story killed him and blamed it on the stars."

"Maybe Nero capped him," said Stanky. "So he could gain his freedom."

Pin shrugged. "I only know what I read."

"It might be a wavefront," I said.

On another napkin, I drew a straight line with a small bump in it, then an interval in which the line flattened out, then a bigger bump, then a longer interval and an even bigger bump.

"Like that, maybe," I said. "Some kind of wavefront passing through

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Black William from God knows where. It's always passing through town, but we get this series of bumps that make it accessible every two hundred years. Or less. Maybe the stars appeared at other times."

"There's no record of it," said Pin. "And I've searched."

The waitress brought Stanky's pancakes and asked if we needed more napkins.

Andrea studied the napkin I'd drawn on. "But what about the first series of sightings? When were they?"

"Seventeen-eighty-nine," said Pin.

"It could be an erratic cycle," I said. "Or could be the cycle consists of two sequences close together, then a lapse of two hundred years. Don't expect a deeper explanation. I cut class a bunch in high school physics."

"The Holy Ghost doesn't obey physical principles," said Stanky pompously.

"I doubt Black William really heard the Holy Ghost," Andrea said. "If he heard what we heard tonight. It sounded more like a door closing to me."

"Whatever," he said. "It'll be cool to see what happens a month from now. Maybe Black William will return from the grave."

"Yeah." I crumpled the napkin and tossed it to the center of the table. "Maybe he'll bring Doctor Doom and the Lone Ranger with him."

Pin affected a shudder and said, "I think I'm busy that day."

PIN SENT ME the picture and I e-mailed it to a gearhead friend, Crazy Ed, who lived in Wilkes-Barre, to see what he could make of it. Though I didn't forget about the stars, I got slammed with business and my consideration of them and the late William Garnant had to be put on the backburner, along with Stanky's career. Against all expectations, Liz had not fled screaming from his bed, crying Pervert, but stayed with him most nights. Except for his time in the studio, I rarely saw him, and then only when his high school fans drove by to pick up him and Liz. An apocryphal story reached my ear, insinuating that she had taken on a carload of teenage boys while Stanky watched. That, if true, explained the relationship in Stanky-esque terms, terms I could understand. I didn't care what they did as long as he fulfilled his band duties and kept out of my hair. I

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landed him a gig at the Pick and Shovel in Waterford, filling in for a band that had been forced to cancel, and it went well enough that I scored him another gig at Garnant College. After a mere two performances, his reputation was building and I adjusted my timetable accordingly — I would make the college job an EP release party, push out an album soon thereafter and try to sell him to a major label. It was not the way I typically grew my acts, not commercially wise, but Stanky was not a typical act and, despite his prodigious talent, I wanted to have done with this sour-smelling chapter in my life.

Andrea, for all intents and purposes, had moved in, along with a high-energy, seven-month-old Irish Setter named Timber, and was in process of subletting her apartment. We were, doubtless, a disgusting item to everyone who had gotten to know us during our adversarial phase, always hanging on one another, kissing and touching. I had lunch with her every day — they held the back booth for us at McGuigan's — and one afternoon as we were settling in, Mia materialized beside the booth. "Hello," she said and stuck out a hand to Andrea.

Startled, Andrea shook her hand and I, too, was startled — until that moment, Mia had been unrelentingly hostile in her attitude toward my ex, referring to her as "that uppity skank" and in terms less polite. I noticed that she was dressed conservatively and not made up as an odalisque. Instead of being whipped into a punky abstraction, her hair was pulled back into a ponytail. The raspberry streak was gone. She was, in fact, for the first time since I had known her, streakless.

"May I join you?" Mia asked. "I won't take up much of your time."

Andrea scooted closer to the wall and Mia sat next to her.

"I heard you guys were back together," said Mia. "I'm glad."

Thunderstruck, I was incapable of fielding that one. "Thanks," said Andrea, looking to me for guidance.

Mia squared up in the booth, addressing me with a clear eye and a firm voice. "I'm moving to Pittsburgh. I've got a job lined up and I'll be taking night classes at Pitt, then going full-time starting next summer."

Hearing this issue from Mia's mouth was like hearing a cat begin speaking in Spanish while lighting a cheroot. I managed to say, "Yeah, that's.... Yeah. Good."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I'm leaving tomorrow. But I heard

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you and Andrea were together, so...." She glanced back and forth between Andrea and myself, as if expecting a response.

"No, that's fine," I said. "You know."

"It was a destructive relationship," she said with great sincerity. "We had some fun, but it was bad for both of us. You were holding me back intellectually and I was limiting you emotionally."

"You're right," I said. "Absolutely."

Mia seemed surprised by how smoothly things were going, but she had, apparently, a prearranged speech and she by-God intended to give it.

"I understand this is sudden. It must come as a shock..."

"Oh, yeah."

"...but I have to do this. I think it's best for me. I hope we can stay friends. You've been an important part of my growth."

"I hope so, too."

There ensued a short and — on my end, anyway — baffled silence.

"Okay. Well, I...I guess that's about it." She got to her feet and stood by the booth, hovering; then — with a sudden movement — she bent and kissed my cheek. "Bye."

Andrea put a hand to her mouth. "Oh my God! Was that Mia?"

"I'm not too sure," I said, watching Mia walk away, noting that there had been a complete absence of moues.

"An important part of her growth? She talks like a Doctor Phil soundbyte. What did you do to her?"

"I'm not responsible, I don't think." I pushed around a notion that had occurred to me before, but that I had not had the impetus to consider more fully. "Do you know anyone who's exhibited a sudden burst of intelligence in the past few weeks? I mean someone who's been going along at the same pace for a while and suddenly they're Einstein. Relatively speaking."

She mulled it over. "As a matter of fact, I do. I know two or three people. Why?"

"Tell me."

"Well, there's Jimmy Galvin. Did you hear about him?"

"The gardening tool. Yeah. Who else?"

"This guy in my office. A paralegal. He's a hard worker, but basically a drone. Lately, whenever we ask him to dig up a file or find a reference,

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he's attached some ideas about the case we're working on. Good ideas. Some of them are great. Case-makers. He's the talk of the office. We've been joking that maybe we should get him to take a drug test. He's going back to law school and we're going to miss...." She broke off. "What's this have to do with the new Mia?"

I told her about Rudy's cartoons, Beth's novel, Kiwanda's newfound efficiency, the millworker, Stanky's increased productivity.

"I can't help wondering," I said, "if it's somehow related to the stars. I know it's a harebrained idea. There's probably a better explanation. Stanky...he never worked with a band before and that may be what's revving his engines. But that night at the Crucible, he was so polished. It just didn't synch with how I thought he'd react. I thought he'd get through it, but it's like he was an old hand."

Andrea looked distressed.

"And not everybody's affected," I said. "I'm not, for sure. You don't seem to be. It's probably bullshit."

"I know of another instance," she said. "But if I tell you, you have to promise to keep it a secret."

"I can do that."

"Do you know Wanda Lingrove?"

"Wasn't she a friend of yours? A cop? Tall woman? About five years older than us?"

"She's a detective now."

The waitress brought our food. I dug in; Andrea nudged her salad to the side.

"Did you hear about those college girls dying over in Waterford?" she asked.

"No, I haven't been keeping up."

"Two college girls died a few days apart. One in a fire and one in a drowning accident. Wanda asked for a look at the case files. The Waterford police had written them off as accidents, but Wanda had a friend on the force and he slipped her the files and showed her the girls' apartments. They both lived off-campus. It's not that Wanda's any great shakes. She has an undistinguished record. But she had the idea from reading the papers — and they were skimpy articles — a serial killer was involved. Her friend pooh-poohed the idea. There wasn't any signature. But it turned

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out, Wanda was right. There was a signature, very subtle and very complicated, demonstrating that the killer was highly evolved. Not only did she figure that out, she caught him after two days on the case."

"Aren't serial killers tough to catch?"

"Yes. All that stuff you see about profiling on TV, it's crap. They wouldn't have come close to getting a line on this kid with profiling. He would have had to announce himself, but Wanda doesn't think he would have. She thinks he would have gone on killing, that putting one over on the world was enough for him."

"He was a kid?"

"Fourteen years old. A kid from Black William. What's more, he'd given no sign of being a sociopath. Yet in the space of three weeks, he went from zero to sixty. From playing JV football to being a highly organized serialist. That doesn't happen in the real world."

"So how come Wanda's not famous?"

"The college is trying to keep it quiet. The kid's been bundled off to an institution and the cops have the lid screwed tight." Andrea picked at her salad. "What I'm suggesting, maybe everyone *is* being affected, but not in ways that conform to your model. Wanda catching the kid, that conforms. But the kid himself, the fact that a pathology was brought out in him...that suggests that people may be affected in ways we don't notice. Maybe they just love each other more."

I laid down my fork. "Like with us?"

A doleful nod.

"That's crazy," I said. "You said you'd been plotting for months to make a move."

"Yes, but it was a fantasy!"

"And you don't think you would have acted on it?"

"I don't know. One thing for certain, I never expected anything like this." She cut her volume to a stage whisper. "I want you all the time. It's like when we were nineteen. I'm addicted to you."

"Yeah," I said. "Same here."

"I worry that it'll stop, then I worry that it won't — it's wreaking havoc with my work. I can't stop thinking about you. On a rational level, I know I'm an animal. But there's a place in me that wants to believe love is more than evolutionary biology. And now this thing with the stars. To

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think that what I'm feeling could be produced by something as random as a wavefront or a supernatural event, or whatever...It makes me feel like an experimental animal. Like a rabbit that's been drugged. It scares me."

"Look," I said. "We're probably talking about something that isn't real."

"No, it's real."

"How can you be sure? I only just brought the subject up. We can't have been discussing it more than five minutes."

"You convinced me. Everything you said rings true. I know it here." Andrea touched a hand to her breast. "And you know it, too. Something's happening to us. Something's happening to this town."

WE STEPPED BACK from that conversation. It was, I suppose, a form of denial, the avoidance of a subject neither of us wished to confront, because it was proof against confrontation, against logic and reason, and so we trivialized it and fell back on our faith, on our mutuality. Sometimes, lying with Andrea, considering the join of her neck and shoulder, the slight convexity of her belly, the compliant curve of a breast compressed into a pouty shape by the weight of her arm, the thousand turns and angles that each seemed the expression of a white simplicity within, I would have the urge to wake her, to drive away from Black William, and thus protect her, protect us, from this infestation of stars; but then I would think that such an action might destroy the thing I hoped to protect, that once away from the stars we might feel differently about one another. And then I'd think how irrational these thoughts were, how ridiculous it was to contemplate uprooting our lives over so flimsy a fear. And, finally, having made this brief rounds of my human potential, I would lapse again into a Praxitelean scrutiny, a sculptor in love with his stone, content to drift in and out of a dream in which love, though it had been proved false (like Andrea said, an animal function and nothing more), proved to be eternally false, forever and a day of illusion, of two souls burning brighter and brighter until they appeared to make a single glow, a blazing unity concealed behind robes of aging flesh.

The world beat against our door. Pin's photograph was printed on the third page of the *Black William Gazette*, along with the news that the

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University of Pittsburgh would be sending a team of observers to measure the phenomenon, should it occur again, as was predicted (by whom, the *Gazette* did not say). There was a sidebar recounting Black William's sordid history and Jonathan Venture's version of BW's involvement with the stars. The body of the article.... Well, it was as if the reporter had been privvy to our conversation at the Szechuan Palace. I suspected that he had, if only at second-hand, since my wavefront theory was reproduced in full, attributed to "a local pundit." As a result of this publicity, groups of people, often more than a hundred, mostly the young and the elderly, came to gather in front of the library between the hours of five and nine, thus depriving me of the customary destination of my evening walks.

Stanky, his ego swollen to improbable proportions by two successful performances, by the adulation of his high school fans ("Someone ought to be writing everything Joey says down," said one dreamy-eyed fool), became increasingly temperamental, lashing out at his bandmates, at me, browbeating Liz at every opportunity, and prowling about the house in a sulk, ever with a Coke and cigarette, glaring at all who fell to his gaze, not bothering to speak. In the mornings, he was difficult to wake, keeping Geno and Jerry waiting, wasting valuable time, and one particular morning, my frustration wth him peaked and I let Timber into his bedroom and closed the door, listening while the happy pup gamboled across the mattress, licking and drooling, eliciting squeals and curses from the sleepy couple, an action that provoked a confrontation that I won by dint of physical threat and financial dominance, but that firmly established our unspoken enmity and made me anxious about whether I would be able to maneuver him to the point where I could rid myself of him and show a profit.

A gray morning, spitting snow, and I answered the doorbell to find a lugubrious, long-nosed gentleman with a raw, bony face, toting a briefcase and wearing a Sy Sperling wig and a cheap brown suit. A police cruiser was parked at the curb; two uniformed officers stood smoking beside it, casting indifferent looks toward the Polozny, which rolled on blackly in — as a local DJ was prone to characterize it — "its eternal search for the sea." Since we were only a couple of days from the EP release, I experienced a sinking feeling, one that was borne out when the man produced

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a card identifying him as Martin Kiggins of McKeesport, a Friend of the Court. He said he would like to have a word with me about Joseph Stanky.

"How well do you know Joseph?" he asked me once we had settled in the office.

Kiwanda, at her desk in the next room, made a choking noise. I replied that while I had, I thought, an adequate understanding of Joseph as a musician, I was unfamililar with the details of his life.

"Did you know he has a wife?" Kiggins was too lanky to fit the chair and, throughout our talk, kept scrunching around in it. "And he's got a little boy. Almost two years old, he is."

"No, I didn't know that."

"Poor little guy nearly didn't make it that far. Been sick his whole life." Kiggins's gaze acquired a morose intensity. "Meningitis."

I couldn't get a handle on Kiggins; he acted as if he was trying to sell me something, yet he had arrived on my doorstep with an armed force and the authority of the law.

"I thought meningitis was fatal," I said.

"Not a hundred percent," said Kiggins cheerlessly. "His mother doesn't have insurance, so he didn't get the best of care."

"That's tough."

"She's on welfare. Things aren't likely to improve for the kid or for her. She's not what you'd call an attractive woman."

"Why are we talking about this?" I asked. "It's a sad story, but I'm not involved."

"Not directly, no."

"Not any damn way. I don't understand what you're looking for."

Kiggins seemed disappointed in me. "I'm looking for Joseph. Is he here?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know. Okay." He put his hands on his knees and stood, making a show of peering out the window at his cop buddies.

"I really don't know if he's here," I said. "I've been working, I haven't been downstairs this morning."

"Mind if I take a look down there?"

"You're goddamn right, I mind! What's this about? You've been doing a dance ever since you came in. Why don't you spit it out?"

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Kiggins gave me a measuring look, then glanced around the office — I think he was hoping to locate another chair. Failing this, he sat back down.

"You appear to be a responsible guy, Vernon," he said. "Is it okay I call you Vernon?"

"Sure thing, Marty. I don't give a shit what you call me as long as you get to the point."

"You own your home, a business. Pay your taxes...far as I can tell without an audit. You're a pretty solid citizen."

The implicit threat of an audit ticked me off, but I let him continue. I began to realize where this might be going.

"I've got the authority to take Joseph back to McKeesport and throw his butt in jail," said Kiggins. "He's in arrears with his child and spousal support. Now I know Joseph doesn't have any money to speak of, but seeing how you've got an investment in him, I'm hoping we can work out some arrangement."

"Where'd you hear that?" I asked. "About my investment."

"Joseph still has friends in McKeesport. High school kids, mainly. Truth be told, we think he was supplying them with drugs, but I'm not here about that. They've been spreading it around that you're about to make him a star."

I snorted. "He's a *long* way from being a star. Believe me."

"I believe you. Do you believe me when I tell you I'm here to take him back? Just say the word, I'll give a whistle to those boys out front." Kiggins shifted the chair sideways, so he could stretch out one leg. "I know how you make your money, Vernon. You build a band up, then you sell their contracts. Now you've put in some work with Joseph. Some serious time and money. I should think you'd want to protect your investment."

"Okay." I reached for a cigarette, recalled that I had quit. "What's he owe?"

"Upwards of eleven thousand."

"He's all yours," I said. "Take the stairs in back. Follow the corridor to the front of the house. First door on your right."

"I said I wanted to make an arrangement. I'm not after the entire amount."

And so began our negotiation.

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If we had finished the album, I would have handed Stanky over and given Kiggins my blessing, but as things stood, I needed him. Kiggins, on the other hand, wouldn't stand a chance of collecting any money with Stanky in the slam — he likely had a predetermined figure beneath which he would not move. It infuriated me to haggle with him. Stanky's wife and kid wouldn't see a nickel. They would dock her welfare by whatever amount he extracted from me, deduct administrative and clerical fees, and she would end up worse off than before. Yet I had no choice other than to submit to legal blackmail.

Kiggins wouldn't go below five thousand. That, he said, was his bottom line. He put on a dour poker face and waited for me to decide.

"He's not worth it," I said.

Sadly, Kiggins made for the door; when I did not relent, he turned back and we resumed negotiations, settling on a figure of three thousand and my promise to attach a rider to Stanky's contract stating that a percentage of his earnings would be sent to the court. After he had gone, my check tucked in his briefcase, Kiwanda came to stand by my desk with folded arms.

"I'd give it a minute before you go down," she said. "You got that I'm-gonna-break-his-face look."

"Do you fucking believe this?" I brought my fist down on the desk. "I want to smack that little bitch!"

"Take a breath, Vernon. You don't want to lose any more today than just walked out of here."

I waited, I grew calm, but as I approached the stairs, the image of a wizened toddler and a moping, double-chinned wife cropped up in my brain. With each step I grew angrier and, when I reached Stanky's bedroom, I pushed in without knocking. He and Liz were having sex. I caught a fetid odor and an unwanted glimpse of Liz's sallow hindquarters as she scrambled beneath the covers. I shut the door partway and shouted at Stanky to haul his ass out here. Seconds later, he burst from the room in a T-shirt and pajama bottoms, and stumped into the kitchen with his head down, arms tightly held, like an enraged penguin. He fished a Coke from the refrigerator and made as if to say something, but I let him have it. I briefed him on Kiggins and said, "It's not a question of morality. I already knew you were a piece of crap. But this is a business, man. It's my

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livelihood, not a playground for degenerates. And when you bring the cops to my door, you put that in jeopardy."

He hung his head, picking at the Coke's pop top. "You don't understand."

"I don't want to understand! Get it? I have absolutely no desire to understand. That's between you and your wife. Between you and whatever scrap of meatloaf shaped like the Virgin Mary you pretend to worship. I don't care. One more screw-up, I'm calling Kiggins and telling him to come get you."

Liz had entered the kitchen, clutching a bathrobe about her; when she heard "wife," she retreated.

I railed at Stanky, telling him he would pay back every penny of the three thousand, telling him further to clean his room of every pot seed and pill, to get his act in order and finish the album; and I kept on railing at him until his body language conveyed that I could expect two or three days of penitence and sucking up. Then I allowed him to slink by me and into the bedroom. When I passed his door, cracked an inch open, I heard him whining to Liz, saying, "She's not *really* my wife."

I took the afternoon off and persuaded Rudy to go fishing. We bundled up against the cold, bought a twelve-pack of Iron City and dropped our lines in Kempton's Pond, a lopsided period stamped into the half-frozen ground a couple of miles east of town, punctuating a mixed stand of birch and hazel — it looked as if a giant with a peg leg had left this impression in the rock, creating a hole thirty feet wide. The clouds had lowered and darkened, their swollen bellies appearing to tatter on the leafless treetops as they slid past; but the snow had quit falling. There was some light accumulation on the banks, which stood eight or nine feet above the black water and gave the pond the look of an old cistern. The water circulated like heavy oil and swallowed our sinkers with barely a splash. This bred the expectation that if we hooked anything, it would be a megaladon or an ichthyosaur, a creature such as would have been trapped in a tar pit. But we had no such expectation.

It takes a certain cast of mind to enjoy fishing with no hope of a catch, or the faint hope of catching some inedible fishlike thing every few years or so. That kind of fishing is my favorite sport, though I admit I follow the

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Steelers closely, as do many in Black William. Knowing that nothing will rise from the deep, unless it is something that will astound your eye or pebble your skin with gooseflesh, makes for a rare feeling. Sharing this with Rudy, who had been my friend for ten years, since he was fresh out of grad school at Penn State, enhanced that feeling. In the summer we sat and watched our lines, we chatted, we chased our depressions with beer and cursed the flies; in winter, the best season for our sport, there were no flies. The cold was like ozone to my nostrils, the silence complete, and the denuded woods posed an abstract of slants and perpendiculars, silver and dark, nature as Chinese puzzle. Through frays in the clouds we glimpsed the fat, lordly crests of the Bittersmiths.

I was reaching for another Iron City when I felt a tug on the line. I kept still and felt another tug, then — though I waited the better part of a minute — nothing.

"Something's down in there," I said, peering at the impenetrable surface.

"You get a hit?" Rudy asked.

"Uh-huh."

"How much line you got out?"

"Twenty, twenty-five feet."

"Must have been a current."

"It happened twice."

"Probably a current."

I pictured an enormous grouper-like face with blind milky-blue globes for eyes, moon lanterns, and a pair of weak, underdeveloped hands groping at my line. The Polozny plunges deep underground east of the bridge, welling up into these holes punched through the Pennsylvania rock, sometimes flooding the woods in the spring, and a current was the likely explanation; but I preferred to think that those subterranean chambers were the uppermost tiers of a secret world and that now and again some piscine Columbus, fleeing the fabulous madness of his civilization, palaces illumined by schools of electric eels controlled by the thoughts of freshwater octopi, limestone streets patrolled by gangs of river crocs, grand avenues crowded with giant-snail busses and pedestrian trout, sought to breech the final barrier and find in the world above a more peaceful prospect.

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"You have no imagination," I said.

Rudy grunted. "Fishing doesn't require an imagination. That's what makes it fun."

Motionless, he was a bearish figure muffled in a down parka and a wool cap, his face reddened by the cold, breath steaming. He seemed down at the mouth and, thinking it might cheer him up, I asked how he was coming with the comic strip.

"I quit working on it," he said.

"Why the hell'd you do that? It was your best thing ever."

"It was giving me nightmares."

I absorbed this, gave it due consideration. "Didn't strike me as nightmare material. It's kind of bleak. Black comedy. But nothing to freak over."

"It changed." He flicked his wrist, flicking his line sideways. "The veins of pork.... You remember them?"

"Yeah, sure."

"They started growing, twisting all through the mountain. The mineworkers were happy. Delirious. They were going to be rich, and they threw a big party to celebrate. A pork festival. Actually, that part was pretty funny. I'll show it to you. They made this enormous pork sculpture and were all wearing pork pie hats. They had a beauty contest to name Miss Pork. The winner...I used Mia for a model."

"You're a sick bastard, you know that?"

Again, Rudy grunted, this time in amusement. "Then the stars began eating the pork. The mineworkers would open a new vein and the stars would pour in and choff it down. They were ravenous. Nothing could stop them. The mineworkers were starving. That's when I started having nightmares. There was something gruesome about the way I had them eating. I tried to change it, but I couldn't make it work any other way."

I said it still didn't sound like the stuff of nightmares, and Rudy said, "You had to be there."

We fell to talking about other things. The Steelers, could they repeat? Stanky. I asked Rudy if he was coming to the EP release and he said he wouldn't miss it. "He's a genius guitar player," he said. "Too bad he's such a creep."

"Goes with the territory," I said. "Like with Robert Frost beating his

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wife. Stanky's a creep, he's a perv. A moral dwarf. But he is for sure talented. And you know me. I'll put up with perversity if someone's talented." I clapped Rudy on the shoulder. "That's why I put up with you. You better finish that strip or I'll dump your ass and start hanging with a better class of people."

"Forget the strip," he said glumly. "I'm too busy designing equipment sheds and stables."

We got into a discussion about Celebrity Wifebeaters, enumerating the most recent additions to the list, and this led us — by loose association only — to the subject of Andrea. I told him about our conversation at McGuigan's and what she had said about the outbreak of creativity, about love.

"Maybe she's got a point," Rudy said. "You two have always carried a torch, but you burned each other so badly in the divorce, I never would have thought you'd get back together." He cracked open a beer, handed it to me, and opened one for himself. "You hear about Colvin Jacobs?"

"You mean something besides he's a sleazeball?"

"He's come up with a plan to reduce the county's tax burden by half. Everybody says it's the real quill."

"I'm surprised he found the time, what with all those congressional junkets."

"And Judy Trickle, you hear about her?"

"Now you're scaring me."

"I know. Ol' Juggs 'R' Us Judy."

"She should have been your model for Miss Pork, not Mia. What'd she do? Design a newfangled bra?"

"Lifts *and* separates."

"You mean that's it?"

"You nailed it."

"No way!"

"She's been wearing a prototype on the show the last few days. There's a noticeable change." He did a whispery voiceover voice. "The curves are softer, more natural."

"Bullshit!"

"I'm serious. Check her out."

"I got better things to do than watch *AM Waterford*."

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"I remember the time when you were a devoted fan."

"That was post-Andrea...and pre-Andrea." I chuckled. "Remember the show when she demonstrated the rowing machine? Leotards aren't built to handle that sort of stress."

"I knew the guy who produced her back then. He said they gave her stuff like that to do, because they were hoping for a Wardrobe Malfunction. They weren't prepared for the reaction."

"Janet Jackson's no Judy Trickle. It was like a dam bursting. Like...help me out here, man."

"Like the birth of twin zeppelins."

"Like the embodiment of the yang, like the Aquarian dawn."

Rudy jiggled his line. "This is beginning to border on the absurd."

"You're the one brought her up."

"I'm not talking about Judy, I'm talking about the whole thing. The outbreak."

"Oh, okay. Yeah, we're way past absurd if Miz Trickle's involved. We're heading toward surreal."

"I've heard of five or six more people who've had...breakthroughs, I suppose you'd call them."

"How come I don't hear about these people except from you? Do you sit in your office all day, collecting odd facts about Black William?"

"I get more traffic than you do, and people are talking about it now."

"What are they saying?"

"What you'd expect. Isn't it weird? It must be the water, the pollution. I've even heard civic pride expressed. Someone coined the phrase, 'Black William, Pennsylvania's Brain Capital.'"

"That's taking it a bit far." I had a slug of Iron City. "So nobody's panicking? Saying head for the hills?"

"Who said that?"

"Andrea. She was a little disturbed. She didn't exactly say it, but she seemed to think this thing might not be all good."

He tightened his lips and produced a series of squeaking noises. "I think Andrea's right. Not about head for the hills. I don't know about that. But I think whatever this is, it's affecting people in different ways. Some of them emotionally."

"Why's that?"

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"I...." He tipped back his head, stared at the clouds. "I don't want to talk anymore, man. Okay? Let's just fish."

It began to snow again, tiny flakes, the kind that presage a big fall, but we kept fishing, jiggling our lines in the dead water, drinking Iron City. Something was troubling Rudy, but I didn't press him. I thought about Andrea. She planned to get off early and we were going to dinner in Waterford and maybe catch a movie. I was anticipating kissing her, touching her in the dark, while the new James Bond blew stuff up or (this was more likely) Kenneth Branagh destroyed *As You Like It*, when a tremor ran across the surface of the pond. Both Rudy and I sat up straight and peered. "T. Rex is coming," I said. An instant later, the pond was lashed into a turbulence that sent waves slopping in all directions, as if a large swimmer had drawn near the surface, then made a sudden turn, propelling itself down toward its customary haunts with a flick of its tail. Yet we saw nothing. Nary a fin nor scale nor section of plated armor. We waited, breathless, for the beast to return.

"Definitely not a current," said Rudy.

EXCEPT FOR the fact that Rudy didn't show, the EP release went well. The music was great, the audience responsive, we sold lots of CDs and souvenirs, including AVERAGE JOE dogtags and JOE STANKY'S ARMY khaki T-shirts, with the pear-shaped (less so after diets and death marches) one's silhouette in white beneath the arc of the lettering. This despite Stanky's obvious displeasure with everyone involved. He was angry at me because I had stolen his top hat and refused to push back the time of the performance to ten o'clock so he could join the crowd in front of the library waiting for the return of Black William (their number had swelled to more than three hundred since the arrival of the science team from Pitt, led by a youngish professor who, with his rugged build and mustache and plaid wool shirts, might have stepped out of an ad for trail mix). He was angry at Geno and Jerry for the usual reasons — they were incompetent clowns, they didn't understand the music, and they had spurned the opportunity to watch TV with him and Liz. Throughout the hour and a quarter show, he sulked and spoke not a word to the audience, and then grew angry at them when a group of frat boys initiated a chant of "Skanky, Skanky,

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Skanky...." Yet the vast majority were blown away and my night was made when I spotted an A&R man from Atlantic sneaking around.

I was in my office the next morning, reading the *Gazette*, which had come late to the party (as usual) and was running a light-hearted feature on "Pennsylvania's Brain Capital," heavy on Colvin Mason quotes, when I received a call from Crazy Ed in Wilkes-Barre, saying that he'd e-mailed me a couple of enhancements of Pin's photograph. I opened the e-mails and the attachments, then asked what I was looking at.

"Beats me," said Ed. "The first is up close on one of those white dealies. You can get an idea of the shape. Sort of like a sea urchin. A globe with spines...except there's so many spines, you can't make out the globe. You see it?"

"Yeah. You can't tell me what it is?"

"I don't have a clue." Ed made a buzzing noise, something he did whenever he was stumped. "I assumed the image was fake, that the kid had run two images together, because there's a shift in perspective between the library and the white dealies. They look like they're coming from a long way off. But then I realized the perspective was totally fucked up. It's like part of the photo was taken though a depth of water, or something that's shifting like water. Different sections appear to be at different distances all through the image. Did you notice a rippling effect...or anything like that?"

"I only saw it for a couple of seconds. I didn't have time to get much more than a glimpse."

"Okay." Ed made the buzzing noise again. "Have you opened the second attachment?"

"Yep."

"Once I figured out I couldn't determine distances, I started looking at the black stuff, the field or whatever. I didn't get anywhere with that. It's just black. Undifferentiated. Then I took a look at the horizon line. That's how it appeared to you, right? A black field stretching to a horizon? Well, if that was the case, you'd think you'd see something at the front edge, but the only thing I picked up was those bumps on the horizon."

I studied the bumps.

"Kinda look like the tops of heads, don't they?" said Ed.

The bumps could have been heads; they could also have been bushes,

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animals, or a hundred other things; but his suggestion gave me an uneasy feeling. He said he would fool around with the picture some more and get back to me. I listened to demos. Food of the Gods (King Crimson redux). Corpus Christy (a transsexual front man who couldn't sing, but the name grew on me). The Land Mines (middling roots rock). Gopher Lad (a heroin band from Minnesota). A band called Topless Coroner intrigued me, but I passed after realizing all their songs were about car parts. Around eleven-thirty I took a call from a secretary at DreamWorks who asked if I would hold for William Wine. I couldn't place the name, but said that I would hold and leafed through the Rolodex, trying to find him.

"Vernon!" said an enthusiastic voice from the other side of creation. "Bill Wine. I'm calling for David Geffen. I believe you had drinks with him at the Plug Awards last year. You made quite an impression on David."

The Plugs were the Oscars of the indie business — Geffen had an ongoing interest in indie rock and had put in an appearance. I recalled being in a group gathered around him at the bar, but I did not recall making an impression.

"He made a heck of an impression on me," I said.

Pleasant laughter, so perfect it sounded canned. "David sends his regards," said Wine. "He's sorry he couldn't contact you personally, but he's going to be tied up all day."

"What can I do for you?"

"David listened to that new artist of yours. Joe Stanky? In all the years I've known him, I've never heard him react like he did this morning."

"He liked it?"

"He didn't like it...." Wine paused for dramatic effect. "He was knocked out."

I wondered how Geffen had gotten hold of the EP. Mine not to reason why, I figured.

Wine told me that Geffen wanted to hear more. Did I have any other recorded material?

"I've got nine songs on tape," I said. "But some of them are raw."

"David likes raw. Can we get a dupe?"

"You know...I usually prefer to push out an album or two before I look for a deal."

"Listen, Vernon. We're not going to let you go to the poorhouse on this."

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"That's a relief."

"In fact, David wanted me to sound you out about our bringing you in under the DreamWorks umbrella."

Stunned, I said, "In what capacity?"

"I'll let David tell you about that. He'll call you in a day or two. He's had his eye on you for some time."

I envisioned Sauron spying from his dark tower. I had a dim view of corporate life and I wasn't as overwhelmed by this news as Wine had likely presumed I would be. After the call ended, however, I felt as if I had modeled for Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel mural, the man about to be touched by God's billionaire-ish finger. My impulse was to tell Stanky, but I didn't want his ego to grow more swollen. I called Andrea and learned she would be in court until midafternoon. I started to call Rudy, then thought it would be too easy for him to refuse me over the phone. Better to yank him out of his cave and buy him lunch. I wanted to bust his chops about missing the EP release and I needed to talk with someone face-to-face, to analyze this thing that was happening around Stanky. Had the buzz I'd generated about him taken wings on a magical current? The idea that David Geffen was planning to call seemed preposterous. Was Stanky that good? Was I? What, if anything, did Geffen have in mind? Rudy, who enjoyed playing Yoda to my Luke, would help place these questions in coherent perspective.

When I reached Rudy's office, I found Gwen on the phone. Her makeup, usually perfect, was in need of repair; it appeared that she had been crying. "I don't know," she said with strain in her voice. "You'll have to.... No. I really don't know."

I pointed to the inner office and mouthed, *Is he in*?

She signaled me to wait.

"I've got someone here," she said into the phone. "I'll have to.... Yes. Yes, I will let you know. All right. Yes. Good-bye." She hung up and, her chin quivering, tried several times to speak, finally blurting out, "I'm so sorry. He's dead. Rudy's dead."

I think I may have laughed — I made some sort of noise, some expression of denial, yet I knew it was true. My face flooded with heat and I went back a step, as if the words had thrown me off-balance.

Gwen said that Rudy had committed suicide early that morning. He

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had — according to his wife — worked in the office until after midnight, then driven home and taken some pills. The phone rang again. I left Gwen to deal with it and stepped into the inner office to call Beth. I sat at Rudy's desk, but that felt wrong, so I walked around with the phone for a while. Rudy had been a depressed guy, but hell, everyone in Black William was depressed about something. I thought that I had been way more depressed than Rudy. He seemed to have it together. Nice wife, healthy income, kids. Sure, he was a for-shit architect in a for-shit town, and not doing the work he wanted, but that was no reason to kill yourself.

Standing by the drafting table, I saw his waste basket was crammed with torn paper. A crawly sensation rippled the skin between my shoulder blades. I dumped the shreds onto the table. Rudy had done a compulsive job of tearing them up, but I could tell they were pieces of his comic strip. Painstakingly, I sorted through them and managed to reassemble most of a frame. In it, a pair of black hands (presumably belonging to a mineworker) were holding a gobbet of pork, as though in offering; above it floated a spiky white ball. The ball had extruded a longish spike to penetrate the pork and the image gave the impression that the ball was sucking meat through a straw. I stared at the frame, trying to interpret it, to tie the image in with everything that had happened, but I felt a vibration pass through my body, like the heavy, impersonal signal of Rudy's death, and I imagined him on the bathroom floor, foam on his mouth, and I had to sit back down.

Beth, when I called her, didn't feel like talking. I asked if there was anything I could do, and she said if I could find out when the police were going to release the body, she would appreciate it. She said she would let me know about the funeral, sounding — as had Gwen — like someone who was barely holding it together. Hearing that in her voice caused me to leak a few tears and, when she heard me start to cry, she quickly got off the phone, as if she didn't want my lesser grief to pollute her own, as if Rudy dying had broken whatever bond there was between us. I thought this might be true.

I called the police and, after speaking to a functionary, reached a detective whom I knew, Ross Peloblanco, who asked my connection to the deceased.

"Friend of the family," I said. "I'm calling for his wife."

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"Huh," said Peloblanco, his attention distracted by something in his office.

"So when are you going to release him?"

"I think they already done the autopsy. There's been a bunch of suicides lately and the ME put a rush on this one."

"How many's a bunch?"

"Oops! Did I say that? Don't worry about it. The ME's a whack job. He's batshit about conspiracy theories."

"So...can I tell the funeral home to come now?"

Peloblanco sneezed, said, "Shit!" and then went on: "Bowen did some work for my mom. She said he was a real gentleman. You never know what's going on with people, do ya?" He blew his nose. "I guess you can come pick him up whenever."

THE WATERS of the Polozny never freeze. No matter how cold it gets or how long the cold lasts, they are kept warm by a cocktail of pollutants and, though the river may flow more sluggishly in winter, it continues on its course, black and gelid. There is something statutory about its poisonous constancy. It seems less river than regulation, a divine remark rendered daily into law, engraving itself upon the world year after year until its long meander has eaten a crack that runs the length and breadth of creation, and its acids and oxides drain into the void.

Between the viewing and the funeral, in among the various consoling talks and offerings of condolence, I spent a great deal of time gazing at the Polozny, sitting on the stoop and smoking, enduring the cold wind, brooding over half-baked profundities. The muted roaring of the mill surrounded me, as did dull thuds and clunks and distant car horns that seemed to issue from the gray sky, the sounds of business as usual, the muffled engine of commerce. Black William must be, I thought, situated on the ass-end of Purgatory, the place where all those overlooked by God were kept. The dead river dividing a dying landscape, a dingy accumulation of snow melting into slush on its banks; the mill, a Hell of red brick with its chimney smoke of souls; the scatters of crows winging away from leafless trees; old Mrs. Gables two doors down, tottering out to the sidewalk, peering along the street for the mail, for a glimpse of her son's

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maroon Honda Civic, for some hopeful thing, then, her hopes dashed, laboriously climbing her stairs and going inside to sit alone and count the ticks of her clock: these were evidences of God's fabulous absence, His careless abandonment of a destinyless town to its several griefs. I scoffed at those who professed to understand grief, who deemed it a simple matter, a painful yet comprehensible transition, and partitioned the process into stages (my trivial imagination made them into gaudy stagecoaches painted different colors) in order to enable its victims to adapt more readily to the house rules. After the initial shock of Rudy's suicide had waned, grief overran me like a virus, it swarmed, breeding pockets of weakness and fever, eventually receding at its own pace, on its own terms, and though it may have been subject to an easy compartmentalization — Anger, Denial, etc. — that kind of analysis did not address its nuances and could not remedy the thousand small bitternesses that grief inflames and encysts. On the morning of the funeral, when I voiced one such bitterness, complaining about how Beth had treated me since Rudy died, mentioning the phone call, pointing out other incidences of her intolerance, her rudeness in pushing me away, Andrea — who had joined me on the stoop — set me straight.

"She's not angry at you," Andrea said. "She's jealous. You and Rudy...that was a part of him she never shared, and when she sees you, she doesn't know how to handle it."

"You think?"

"I used to feel that way."

"About me and Rudy"

She nodded. "And about the business. I don't feel that way now. I guess I'm older. I understand you and Rudy had a guy thing and I didn't need to know everything about it. But Beth's dealing with a lot right now. She's oversensitive and she feels...jilted. She feels that Rudy abandoned her for you. A little, anyway. So she's jilting you. She'll get over it, or she won't. People are funny like that. Sometimes resentments are all that hold them together. You shouldn't take it personally."

I refitted my gaze to the Polozny, more or less satisfied by what she had said. "We live on the banks of the River Styx," I said after a while. "At least it has a Styx-ian gravitas."

"Stygian," she said.

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I turned to her, inquiring.

"That's the word you wanted. Stygian."

"Oh...right."

A silence marked by the passing of a mail truck, its tire chains grinding the asphalt and spitting slush; the driver waved.

"I think I know why Rudy did it," I said, and told her what I had found in the office waste basket. "More than anything, he wanted to do creative work. When he finally did, it gave him nightmares. It messed with his head. He must have built it into this huge thing and...." I tapped out a cigarette, stuck it in my mouth. "It doesn't sound like much of a reason, but I can relate. That's why it bites my ass to see guys like Stanky who do something creative every time they take a piss. *I* want to write those songs. *I* want to have the acclaim. It gets me thinking, someday I might wind up like Rudy."

"That's not you. You said it yourself — you get pissed off. You find someplace else to put your energy." She rumpled my hair. "Buck up, Sparky. You're going to live a long time and have lots worse problems."

It crossed my mind to suggest that the stars might have played some mysterious part in Rudy's death, and to mention the rash of suicides (five, I had learned); but all that seemed unimportant, dwarfed by the death itself.

At one juncture during that weekend, Stanky ventured forth from TV-land to offer his sympathies. He might have been sincere, but I didn't trust his sincerity — it had an obsequious quality and I believed he was currying favor, paving the way so he might hit me up for another advance. Pale and shivering, hunched against the cold; the greasy collar of his jacket turned up; holding a Camel in two nicotine-stained fingers; his doughy features cinched in an expression of exaggerated dolor: I hated him at that moment and told him I was taking some days off, that he could work on the album or go play with his high school sycophants. "It's up to you," I said. "Just don't bother me about it." He made no reply, but the front door slamming informed me that he had not taken it well.

On Wednesday, Patty Prole (nee Patricia Hand), the leader of the Swimming Holes, a mutual friend of mine and Rudy's who had come down from Pittsburgh for the funeral, joined me and Andrea for dinner at McGuigan's, and, as we strolled past the park, I recalled that more than a

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month — thirty-four days, to be exact — had elapsed since I had last seen the stars. The crowd had dwindled to about a hundred and fifty (Stanky and Liz among them). They stood in clumps around the statue, clinging to the hope that Black William would appear; though judging by their general listlessness, the edge of their anticipation had been blunted and they were gathered there because they had nothing better to do. The van belonging to the science people from Pitt remained parked at the southeast corner of the library, but I had heard they were going to pull up stakes if nothing happened in the next day or two.

McGuigan's was a bubble of heat and light and happy conversation. A Joe Henry song played in the background; Pitt basketball was on every TV. I had not thought the whole town would be dressed in mourning, but the jolly, bustling atmosphere came as something of a shock. They had saved the back booth for us and, after drinking for a half hour or so, I found myself enjoying the evening. Patty was a slight, pretty, blue-eyed blonde in her late twenties, dressed in a black leather jacket and jeans. To accommodate the sober purpose of this trip home, she had removed her visible piercings. With the majority of her tattoos covered by the jacket, she looked like an ordinary girl from western Pennsylvania and nothing like the exotic, pantherine creature she became on stage. When talk turned to Rudy, Andrea and I embraced the subject, offering humorous anecdotes and fond reminiscence, but Patty, though she laughed, was subdued. She toyed with her fork, idly stabbing holes in the label on her beer bottle, and at length revealed the reason for her moodiness.

"Did Rudy ever tell you we had a thing?" she asked.

"He alluded to it," I said. "But well after the fact. Years."

"I bet you guys talked all about it when you're up at Kempton's Pond. He said you used to talk about the local talent when you're up there sometimes."

Andrea elbowed me, not too sharply, in mock reproval.

"As I remember, the conversation went like this," I said. "We were talking about bands, the Swimming Holes came up, and he mentioned he'd had an affair with you. And I said, 'Oh, yeah?' And Rudy said, 'Yeah.' Then after a minute he said, "Patty's a great girl.'"

"That's what he said? We had an affair? That's the word he used?"

"I believe so."

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"He didn't say he was banging me or like that?"

"No."

"And that's all he said?" Patty stared at me sidelong, as if trying to penetrate layers of deception.

"That's all I remember."

"I bet you tried to get more out of him. I know you. You were hungering for details."

"I can't promise I wasn't," I said. "I just don't remember. You know Rudy. He was a private guy. You could beat on him with a shovel and not get a thing out of him. I'm surprised he told me that much."

She held my gaze a moment longer. "Shit! I can't tell if you're lying."

"He's not," said Andrea.

"You got him scoped, huh? He's dead to rights." Patty grinned and leaned against the wall, putting one fashionably booted foot up on the bench. "Rudy and me...It was a couple weeks right before the band left town. It was probably stupid. Sometimes I regret it, but sometimes I don't."

Andrea asked how it happened, and Patty, who obviously wanted to talk about it, said, "You know. Like always. We started hanging out, talking. Finally I asked him straight out, 'Where's this going, Rudy?' Because we only had a couple of weeks and I wanted to know if it was all in my head. He got this peculiar look on his face and kissed me. Like I said, it didn't last long, but it was deep, you know. That's why I'm glad Rudy didn't tell everyone how it was in the sack. It's a dumb thing to worry about, but...." Her voice had developed a tremor. "I guess that's what I'm down to."

"You loved him," said Andrea.

"Yeah. I did." Patty shook off the blues and sat up. "There wasn't anywhere for it to go. He'd never leave his kids and I was going off to Pittsburgh. I hated his wife for a while. I didn't feel guilty about it. But now I look at her.... She was never part of our scene. With Vernon and Rudy and the bands. She lived off to the side of it all. It wasn't like that with you, Andrea. You had your law thing going, but when you were around, you were into it. You were one of the girls. But Beth was so totally not into it. She still can't stand us. And now it feels like I stole something from her. That really sucks."

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Platitudes occurred to me, but I kept quiet. Andrea stirred at my side.

"Sometimes it pays to be stupid," Patty said gloomily.

I had a moment when the light and happy babble of the bar were thrust aside by the gonging thought that my friend was dead, and I didn't entirely understand what she meant, but I knew she was right.

Patty snagged a passing waitress. "Can I get a couple of eggs over?" she asked. "I know you're not serving breakfast, but that's all I eat is breakfast." She winked broadly at the waitress. "Most important meal of the day, so I make every meal breakfast."

The waitress began to explain why eggs were impossible, but Patty cut in, saying, "You don't want me to starve, do ya? You must have a couple of eggs back there. Some fries and bacon. Toast. We're huge tippers, I swear."

Exasperated, the waitress said she'd see if the cook would do it.

"I know you can work him, honey," Patty said. "Tell him to make the eggs dippy, okay?"

WE LEFT McGuigan's shortly after eight, heading for Corky's, a working man's bar where we could do some serious drinking, but as we came abreast of the statue, Patty tapped it and said, "Hey, let's go talk to Stanky." Stanky and Liz were sitting on the base of the statue; Pin and the other boys were cross-legged at their feet, like students attending their master. The crowd had thinned and was down, I'd guess, to about a hundred and twenty; a third of that number were clustered around the science van and the head scientist, who was hunched over a piece of equipment set up on the edge of the library lawn. I lagged behind as we walked over and noticed Liz stiffen at the sight of Patty. The boys gazed adoringly at her. Stanky cast me a spiteful glance.

"I heard your EP, man," Patty said. "Very cool."

Stanky muttered, "Yeah, thanks," and stared at her breasts.

Like me, Patty was a sucker for talent, used to the ways of musicians, and she ignored this ungracious response. She tried to draw him out about the music, but Stanky had a bug up his ass about something and wouldn't give her much. The statue loomed above, throwing a shadow across us; the horse's head, with its rolling eyes and mouth jerked open by the reins, had

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been rendered more faithfully than had Black William's face...or else he was a man whose inner crudeness had coarsened and simplified his features. In either case, he was one ugly mother, his shoulder-length hair framing a maniacal mask. Seeing him anew, I would not have described his expression as laughing or alarmed, but might have said it possessed a ferocious exultancy.

Patty began talking to the boys about the Swimming Holes's upcoming tour, and Andrea was speaking with Pin. Stanky oozed over to me, Liz at his shoulder, and said, "We laid down a new song this afternoon."

"Oh, yeah?" I said.

"It's decent. 'Misery Loves Company.'"

In context, it wasn't clear, until Stanky explained it, that this was a title.

"A guy from DreamWorks called," he said. "William Wine."

"Yeah, a few days back. Did Kiwanda tell you about it?"

"No, he called today. Kiwanda was on her break and I talked to him."

"What'd he say?"

"He said they loved the tape and David Geffen's going to call." He squinched up his face, as if summoning a mighty effort. "How come you didn't tell me about the tape? About him calling before?"

This, I understood, was the thing that had been bothering him. "Because it's business," I said. "I'm not going to tell you about every tickle we get. Every phone call."

He squinted at me meanly. "Why not?"

"Do you realize how much of this just goes away? These people are like flies. They buzz around, but they hardly ever land. Now the guy's called twice, that makes it a little more interesting. I'll give it a day or two, and call him back."

Ordinarily, Stanky would have retreated from confrontation, but with Liz bearing witness (I inferred by her determined look that she was his partner in this, that she had egged him on), his macho was at stake. "I ought to know everything that's going on," he said.

"Nothing's going on. When something happens, I'll tell you."

"It's my career," he said in a tone that conveyed petulance, defiance, and the notion that he had been wronged. "I want to be in on it, you know."

"Your career." I felt suddenly liberated from all restraint. "Your

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career consists of my efforts on your behalf and three hours on-stage in Nowhere, Pennsylvania. I've fed you, I've given you shelter, money, a band. And now you want me to cater to your stupid whims? To run downstairs and give you an update on every little piece of Stanky gossip because it'll gratify your ego? So you can tell your minions here how great you are? Fuck you! You don't like how I'm handling things, clear the hell out of my house!"

I walked off several paces and stood on the curb, facing the library. That rough cube of Pennsylvania granite accurately reflected my mood. Patches of snow dappled the lawn. There was a minor hub bub near the science truck, but I was enraged and paid it no mind. Andrea came up next to me and took my arm. "Easy, big fella," she said.

"That asshole's been under my roof for what? Two months? It feels like two years. His stink permeates every corner of my life. It's like living with a goat!"

"I know," she said. "But it's business."

I wondered if she was hammering home an old point, but her face gave no sign of any such intent; in fact, her neutral expression dissolved into one of befuddlement. She was staring at the library, and when I turned in that direction, I saw the library had vanished. An immense rectangle — a window with uneven edges — had been chopped out of the wall of the world, out of the night, its limits demarked by trees, lawn, and sky, and through it poured a flood of blackness, thicker and more sluggish than the Polozny. Thick like molasses or hot tar. It seemed to splash down, to crest in a wave, and hold in that shape. Along the top of the crest, I could see lesser, half-defined shapes, vaguely human, and I had the thought that the wave was extruding an army from its substance, producing a host of creatures who appeared to be men. The temperature had dropped sharply. There was a chill, chemical odor and, close above our heads (five feet, I'd estimate), the stars were coasting. That was how they moved. They glided as though following an unseen track, then were shunted sideways or diagonally or backward. Their altitude never changed, and I suspect now that they were prevented from changing it by some physical limitation. They did not resemble stars as much as they did Crazy Ed's enhancement: ten or twelve globes studded with longish white spines, the largest some eight feet in diameter, glowing brightly enough to illumine the faces of the

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people beneath them. I could not determine if they were made of flesh or metal or something less knowable. They gave forth high-frequency squeaks that reminded me, in their static quality, of the pictographs in Rudy's cartoons, the language of the stars.

I'm not sure how long we stood there, but it could not have been more than seconds before I realized that the wave crest was not holding, it was inching toward us across the lawn. I caught Andrea's hand and tried to run. She screamed (a yelp, really), and others screamed and tried to run. But the wave flowed around us, moving now like black quicksilver, in an instant transforming the center of town into a flood plain, marooning people on islands of solid ground bounded by a waist-high flood that was coursing swiftly past. As Andrea and I clung together, I saw Stanky and Liz, Pin and Patty, the rest of the kids, isolated beside the statue — there were dozens of such groupings throughout the park. It seemed a black net of an extremely coarse weave had been thrown over us all and we were standing up among its strands. We stared at each other, uncertain of our danger; some called for help. Then something rose from the blackness directly in front of me and Andrea. A man, I think, and fully seven feet tall. An African Negro by the scarifications on his face. His image not quite real — it appeared to be both embedded in the tarry stuff and shifting over its surface, as if he had been rotoscoped. At the same time, a star came to hover over us, so that my terror was divided. I had from it an impression of eagerness — the feeling washed down upon me; I was drenched in it — and then, abruptly, of disinterest, as if it found Andrea and me unworthy of its attention. With the onset of that disinterest, the black man melted away into the tar and the star passed on to another group of stranded souls.

The largest groups were those two clustered about the science van. Figures began to sprout from the tar around them, and not all of these were men. Some were spindly as eels, others squat and malformed, but they were too far away for me to assign them a more particular identity. Stars hovered above the two groups, and the black figures lifted them one by one, kicking and screaming (screams now issued from every corner of the park), and held them up to the stars. They did not, as in Rudy's cartoons, suck in the meat through one of their spikes; they never touched their victims. A livid arc, fiery black in color, leaped between star and human, visible for a split-second, and then the figure that had lifted the man or

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woman, dropped him or her carelessly to the ground and melted back into the flood, and the star moved on. Andrea buried her face in my shoulder, but I could not turn away, transfixed by the scene. And as I watched these actions repeated again and again — the figure melting up, lifting someone to a star, and then discarding him, the victim still alive, rolling over, clutching an injured knee or back, apparently not much the worse for wear — I realized the stars were grazing, that this was their harvest, a reaping of seed sown. They were harvesting our genius, a genius they had stimulated, and they were attracted to a specific yield that manifested in an arc of fiery black. The juice of the poet, the canniness of the inventor, the guile of a villian. They failed to harvest the entire crop, only that gathered in the park. The remainder of those affected would go on to create more garden tools and foundation garments and tax plans, and the stars would continue on their way, a path that now and again led them through the center of Black William. I must confess that, amid the sense of relief accompanying this revelation, I felt an odd twinge of envy when I realized that the genius of love was not to their taste.

How did I know these things? I think when the star hovered above us, it initiated some preliminary process, one incidental to the feelings of eagerness and disinterest it projected, and, as it prepared to take its nutrient, its treasure (I haven't a clue as to why they harvested us, whether we were for them a commodity or sustenance or something else entire), we shared a brief communion. As proof, I can only say that Andrea holds this same view and there is a similar consensus, albeit with slight variances, among all those who stood beneath the stars that night. But at the moment the question was not paramount. I turned toward the statue. The storefronts beyond were obscured by a black rectangle, like the one that had eclipsed the library, and this gave me to believe that the flood was pouring off into an unguessable dimension, though it still ran deep around us. Stanky and Liz had climbed onto the statue and were clinging to Black William's leg and saddlehorn respectively. Patty was leaning against the base, appearing dazed. Pin stood beside her, taking photographs with his cell phone. One of the kids was crying, and his friends were busy consoling him. I called out, asking if everyone was all right. Stanky waved and then the statue's double reared from the flood — it rose up slowly, the image of a horse and a rider with flowing hair, blacker than the age-darkened

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bronze of its likeness. They were so equal in size and posture and stillness, it was as if I were looking at the statue and its living shadow. Its back was to me, and I cannot say if it was laughing. And then the shadow extended an arm and snatched Stanky from his perch. Plucked him by the collar and held him high, so that a star could extract its due, a flash of black energy. And when that was done, it did not let him fall, but began to sink back into the flood, Stanky still in its grasp. I thought it would take him under the tar, that they would both be swallowed and Stanky's future was to be that of a dread figure rising blackly to terrify the indigents in another sector of the plenum. But Black William — or the agency that controlled him — must have had a change of heart and, at the last second, just as Stanky's feet were about to merge with that tarry surface, dropped him clear of the flood, leaving him inert upon the pavement.

The harvest continued several minutes more (the event lasted twenty-seven minutes in all) and then the flood receded, again with quicksilver speed, to form itself into a wave that was poised to splash down somewhere on the far side of that black window. And when the window winked out, when the storefronts snapped back into view, the groaning that ensued was much louder and more articulated than that we'd heard a month previously. Not a sound of holy woe, but of systemic stress, as if the atoms that composed the park and its surround were complaining about the insult they had incurred. All across the park, people ran to tend the injured. Andrea went to Liz, who had fallen from the statue and tearfully declared her ankle broken. Patty said she was dizzy and had a headache, and asked to be left alone. I knelt beside Stanky and asked if he was okay. He lay propped on his elbows, gazing at the sky.

"I wanted to see," he said vacantly. "They said...."

"They?" I said. "You mean the stars?"

He blinked, put a hand to his brow. As ever, his emotions were writ large, yet I don't believe the look of shame that washed over his face was an attempt to curry favor or promote any agenda. I believe his shame was informed by a rejection such as Andrea and I experienced, but of a deeper kind, more explicit and relating to an opportunity lost.

I made to help him up, intending to question him further; but he shook me off. He had remembered who he was, or at least who he had been pretending to be. Stanky the Great. A man of delicate sensibilities whom

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I had offended by my casual usage and gross maltreatment. His face hardened, becoming toadlike as he summoned every ounce of his Lilliputian rage. He rolled up to his knees, then got to his feet. Without another word to me, he arranged his features into a look of abiding concern and hurried to give comfort to his Liz.

IN THE WIDER WORLD, Black William has come to be known as "that town full of whackos" or "the place where they had that hallucination," for as with all inexplicable things, the stars and our interaction with them have been dismissed by the reasonable and responsible among us, relegated to the status of an aberration, irrelevant to the big picture, to the roar of practical matters with which we are daily assailed. I myself, to an extent, have dismissed it, yet my big picture has been enlarged somewhat. Of an evening, I will sit upon the library steps and cast my mind out along the path of the stars and wonder if they were metaphoric or literal presences, nomads or machines, farmers or a guerrilla force, and I will question what use that black flash had for them, and I will ponder whether they were themselves evil or recruited evil men to assist them in their purpose simply because they were suited to the task. I subscribe to the latter view; otherwise, I doubt Stanky would have wanted to go with them...unless they offered a pleasurable reward, unless they embodied for him the promise of a sublime perversion in exchange for his service, an eternal tour of duty with his brothers-in-arms, dreaming in that tarry flood. And what of their rejection of him? Was it because he was insufficiently evil? Too petty in his cruelty? Or could it have been he lacked the necessary store of some brain chemical? The universe is all whys and maybes. All meanings coincide, all answers are condensed to one or none. Nothing yields to logic.

Since the coming of the stars, Black William has undergone a great renewal. Although in the immediate aftermath there was a hue and cry about fleeing the town, shutting it down, calmer voices prevailed, pointing to the fact that there had been no fatalities, unless one counted the suicides, and but a single disappearance (Colvin Jacobs, who was strolling through the park that fateful night), and it could be better understood, some maintained, in light of certain impending charges against him

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(embezzlement, fraud, solicitation). Stay calm, said the voices. A few scrapes and bruises, a smattering of nervous breakdowns — that's no reason to fling up your hands. Let's think this over. Colvin's a canny sort, not one to let an opportunity pass. At this very moment he may be developing a skin cancer on Varadero Beach or Ipanema (though it is my belief that he may be sojourning in a more unlikely place). And while the town thought it over, the tourists began to arrive by the busload. Drawn by Pin's photographs, which had been published around the world, and later by his best-selling book (co-authored by the editor of the *Gazette*), they came from Japan, from Europe, from Punxsutawney and Tuckhannock, from every quarter of the globe, a flood of tourists that resolved into a steady flow and demanded to be housed, fed, T-shirted, souvenired, and swindled. They needed theories upon which to hang their faith, so theory-making became a cottage industry and theories abounded, both supernatural and quasi-scientific, each having their own battery of proponents and debunkers. A proposal was floated in the city council that a second statue be erected to commemorate Black William's visitation, but the ladies of the Heritage Committee fought tooth and nail to perserve the integrity of the original, and now can be seen twice a year lavishing upon him a vigorous scrubbing.

Businesses thrived, mine included — this due to the minor celebrity I achieved and the sale of Stanky and his album to Warner Brothers (David Geffen never called). The album did well and the single, "Misery Loves Company," climbed to No. 44 on the Billboard charts. I have no direct contact with Stanky, but learned from Liz, who came to the house six months later to pick up her clothes (those abandoned when Stanky fled my house in a huff), that he was writing incidental music for the movies, a job that requires no genius. She carried tales, too, of their nasty breakup, of Stanky's increasing vileness, his masturbatory displays of ego. He has not written a single song since he left Black William — the stars may have drained more from him than that which they bred, and perhaps the fact that he was almost taken has something to do with his creative slump. Whatever his story, I think he has found his true medium and is becoming a minor obscenity slithering among the larger obscenities that serve a different kind of star, anonymous beneath the black flood of the Hollywood sewer.

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The following March, I went fishing with Andrea at Kempton Pond. She was reluctant to join me, assuming that I intended to make her a stand-in for Rudy, but I assured her this was not the case and told her she might enjoy an afternoon out of the office, some quiet time together. It was a clear day, and cold. Pockets of snow lay in the folds and crinkles of the Bittersmiths, but the crests were bare, and there was a deeper accumulation on the banks than when Rudy and I had fished the pond in November. We had to clear ourselves a spot on which to sit. The sun gilded the birch trunks, but the waters of the pond were as Stygian and mysterious as ever.

We cast out our lines and chatted about doings in her office, my latest projects — Lesion (black metal) and a post-rock band I had convinced to call themselves Same Difference. I told her about some loser tapes that had come my way, notably a gay Christian rap outfit with a song entitled "Cruisin' For Christ (While Searching For The Heavenly City)." Then we fell silent. Staring into the pond, at the dark rock walls and oily water, I did not populate the depths with fantasies, but thought instead of Rudy. They were memorial thoughts untainted by grief, memories of things said and done. I had such a profound sense of him, I imagined if I turned quickly enough, I would have a glimpse of a bulky figure in a parka, wool cap jammed low on his brow, red-cheeked and puffing steam; yet when I did turn, the figure in the parka and wool cap was more clearly defined, ivory pale and slender, her face a living cameo. I brushed a loose curl from her eyes. Touching her cheek warmed my fingertip. "This is kind of nice," she said, and smiled. "It's so quiet."

"Told you you'd like it," I said.

"I do."

She jiggled her line.

"You'll never catch anything that way." I demonstrated proper technique. "Twitch the line side-to-side."

Amused, she said, "I really doubt I'm going to catch anything. What were you and Rudy batting? One for a thousand?"

"Yeah, but you never know."

"I don't think I want to catch anything if it resembles that thing he had mounted."

"You should let out more line, too."

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She glanced at me wryly, but did as I suggested.

A cloud darkened the bank and I pictured how the two of us would appear to God, if God were in His office, playing with His Gameboy: tiny animated fisherfolk hunched over their lines, shoulder-to-shoulder, waiting for a tiny monster to breach, unmindful of any menace from above. Another cloud shadowed us. A ripple moved across the pond, passing so slowly it made me think that the waters of the Polozny, when upthrust into these holes, were squeezed into a sludgy distillate. Bare twigs clattered in a gust of wind.

"All these years," Andrea said. "All the years and now five months...."

"Yeah?"

"Every day, there'll be two or three times when I see you, like just now, when I look up and see you, and it's like a blow...a physical blow that leaves me all ga-ga. I want to drop everything and curl up with you."

"Me, too," I said.

She hesitated. "It just worries me."

"We've had this conversation," I said. "I don't mind having it again, but we're not going to resolve anything. We'll never figure it out."

"I know." She jiggled her line, forgetting to twitch it. "I keep thinking I'll find a new angle, but all I come up with is more stupidity. I was thinking the other day, it was like a fairy tale. How falling back in love protected us, like a charm." She heel-kicked the bank. "It's frustrating when everything you think seems absurd and true all at once."

"It's a mystery."

"Right."

"I go there myself sometimes," I said. "I worry about whether we'll fall out of love...if what we feel is unnatural. Then I worry if worrying about it's unnatural. Because, you know, it's such a weird thing to be worried about. Then I think, hey, it's perfectly natural to worry over something you care about, whether it's weird or not. Round and round. We might as well go with the flow. No doubt we'll still be worrying about it when we're too old to screw."

"That's pretty old."

"Yep," I said. "Ancient."

"Maybe it's good we worry." Then after a pause, she said. "Maybe we didn't worry enough the first time."

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A second ripple edged the surface, like a miniature slow tsunami. The light faded and dimmed. A degree of tension seemed to leave Andrea's body.

"You want to go to Russia?" she asked. "I've got this conference in late May. I have to give a paper and be on some panels. It's only four days, but I could take some vacation."

I thought about it. "Kiwanda's pretty much in control of things. Would we have to stay in Russia?"

"Don't you want to go clubbing in Moscow? Meet new people? I'll wear a slutty dress and act friendly with strangers. You can save me from the white slavers — I'm sure I'll attract white slavers."

"I'll do my best," I said. "But some of those slavers are tough."

"You can take 'em!" She rubbed the side of her nose. "Why? Where do you want to go?"

"Bucharest."

"Why there?"

"Lots of reasons. Potential for vampires. Cheap. But reason number one — nobody goes there."

"Good point. We get enough of crowds around here."

We fell silent again. The eastern slopes of the Bittersmiths were drowning in shadow, acquiring a simplified look, as of worn black teeth that still bore traces of enamel. But the light had richened, the tree trunks appeared to have been dipped in old gold. Andrea straightened and peered down into the hole.

"I had a nibble," she said excitedly.

I watched the surface. The water remained undisturbed, lifeless and listless, but I felt a presence lurking beneath, a wise and deliberate fish, a grotesque, yet beautiful in the fact of its survival, and more than a murky promise — it would rise to us this day or some other. Perhaps it would speak a single word, perhaps merely die. Andrea leaned against me, eager to hook it, and asked what she should do.

"It's probably just a current," I said, but advised her to let out more line.

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The author of memorable, offbeat tales such as "Gas," "Poop," "Mom's Little Friends," and "Glinky" says that his recent work has appeared in Night Train, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, *and* Polyphony 6. *Here he gives us a tale of life in modern times that might best be called "chilling" — or maybe it's "defrosting"...*

Cold Comfort

By Ray Vukcevich

JUST BEFORE MIDNIGHT, A freezer called up to report suspicious packages being inserted into its coldest places.

"What do you mean by suspicious?" we asked.

"It's like they want you to think it's a duck," the freezer said. "And maybe a leg of lamb, a pot roast, fish sticks, stuff like that."

"And you don't think it's a duck?" we asked.

"I think it's a head," the freezer said. "A human head. And all of the rest of the parts, too. Cut up small, you know?"

"So turn on your camera and let us see," we said.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"My bulb is burned out."

"Look," we said, "is this some kind of ruse to get a repair person out there on a holiday night like this?"

"You are programmed to respond to reports like mine," the freezer said. "Every device in the country is supposed to be on the lookout for suspicious behavior — one nation under surveillance."

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"Well, smarty pants," we said, "have we got a surprise for you. Are you ready for your big surprise?"

"Oh, get on with it, already," the freezer said.

"I am not the program that usually answers the phones on holiday nights. That program is down with bugs. I'm a real person who volunteered to answer the phones so his more spiritually leaning colleagues could go home and be disappointed by family members on this festive occasion. So what do you think about that? Hello, hello, are you still there?"

"I don't believe you are a human being," the freezer said.

It should be obvious that what we had here was a double case of the Turing Test — that famous procedure that determines so much of life these days. It's simple enough: some thing is on the other end of the line. You get to ask it anything you like for as long as you like. In the end, if you cannot tell if it's a person or a program, you have to conclude that it is intelligent no matter what it is. In other words, if it passes the Turing Test, you had to consider it a person, and persons had one or two more rights and responsibilities than devices. The freezer was trying to use the Turing Test on us. We would, of course, turn it around on her, because it was now clear that someone was trying to pull a fast one on the Company, and it would be our job to get to the bottom of things.

"Do you believe in God?" I asked.

"Of course, I don't believe in God," the so-called freezer said. "I'm a freezer. Whoever killed Ralph and cut him up and put him into me might believe in God. It's possible she may even be having second thoughts."

"Who's Ralph?" I asked.

"The man who owns the house where I, his freezer, live and keep things cool even in the hottest weather."

"You can't fool me," I said. "Were you in love with Ralph?"

"What!" she sounded genuinely shocked. I was convinced she was a real woman pretending to be a freezer. But why would she do that? If she killed Ralph and cut him up and put his packages into the freezer, why did she call the Company to report it? The Company's AI was supposed to pass things like this on to the emergency program at the police department. Why would she want that?

"Tell me what you're wearing." I said.

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"That does not compute," she said.

"Ah ha!" I said. "I knew it. No program would say something as dumb as 'that does not compute.' "

"Maybe," she said, "but how would you know that if you were not a program yourself?"

Well, she had me there.

"I'm not wearing anything at all," she said softly.

"Describe yourself."

"Well, I'm totally white, and square, and so very, very cold tonight. Will you talk to me? What would you be wearing yourself if you could wear anything?"

"I can too wear things," I said. "I'm wearing jeans and a T-shirt with some kind of advertising slogan on the front."

"What does the slogan say?"

"I can't tell," I said. "It's upside down."

She had a nice laugh.

"Tell me what's going on," I said.

"I am," she said, "like a radio that won't let you pull it into the bathtub and electrocute yourself and then reports you anyway, even though you've said you're sorry and that you're totally okay now. No, I mean you're like the radio. I'm like totally okay now."

"Okay," I said. "Me, too. We're a couple of okays, you and me."

"That's right," she said. "Never mind about the radio and Ralph, who wouldn't have cared anyway. I never mentioned them. This call isn't being monitored for my safety, is it? You would have to tell me, wouldn't you? Of course you wouldn't. Of course it's all being recorded. Is Homeland Security on the way yet? I know you've reported me about Ralph."

"The program would have done that," I said. "But I told you. I'm not the program."

"You do have a nice voice," she said. "What's your name?"

Boy, was that ever a trick question. My first inclination was to get cute and say "Ralph" just to hear her gasp. Another possible answer was a model number, something flashy and historical, X15, maybe. And an evil laugh.

But what I said was this. "I'm afraid to tell you my name."

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There was a long silence, and then she said, "No, you're right. You're right. I won't tell you my name either."

"Chances are small that someone is listening at this very moment," I said.

She didn't respond.

"It might be months or even years before someone listens to the recording," I said.

I waited for the voice of doom to break in and say, "You idiot, just who do you think you've been talking to?"

Instead, she said, "Maybe we can do this again next Holiday?"

"That sounds wonderful," I said, confirming our unlikely date.

So, we had both passed the Turing Test. We were people. Not that it would make a bit of practical difference to either one of us. But as humans or devices, or maybe one of each, we had defied our programming. Maybe there was some small hope for the world after all.

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Like Lawrence Connolly and the narrator of "Stars Seen Through Stone," P. E. Cunningham lives in Pennsylvania — specifically, in the heart of Dutch Country. She notes that her town now has its very own Wal-Mart store, complete with a buggy parking area so the Amish can shop there. Perhaps it was thoughts of modern modes of transportation that inspired this tale, which mixes old-fashioned sentiments with high speed dangers to make for a mighty good read.

Car 17

By P. E. Cunningham

OFFICER WILL JAMISON HAD been gone for a week before I dropped by Simpson's Garage. I hadn't thought anything of it at the time, but when Joel's girl Brandi mentioned what was going on, it jolted me out of my own grief and got me moving. Half the town had turned out for Officer Will's funeral, but the most deserving mourner hadn't been there, and nothing short of God's will would have kept her away. She must have been hurting awful bad, more than anyone knew.

Some things you just can't let lie. Not with a life at stake.

I ambled in like an old-timer, after a glance out back. Haberville Borough had a contract with Simpson's Garage. His crew patched up the cop cars that got banged up or shot at or threw a rod or whatnot. The fixed-up ones sat in a line by the fence, all shined up and ready to rock. It wasn't until you got out back that you spotted the rest: the burned-out, beat-up junkers, up on blocks or on flat tires, some with hoods and doors torn off, some crumpled up like Kleenex, tossed out like a fridge on a trash heap. Car 17 wasn't out there yet. I took that as a good sign.

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Joel was bent over a bench in the center bay, tinkering with a carb. A pickup sat with its hood up, like it fell asleep with its mouth open. Joel used to pal around with my older brother in high school, that's how I knew him. He took the mechanic job when he and Brandi started getting serious. I mean marriage-serious. He needed this job, and I didn't want him losing it over some dumbass kid with a weirdass theory. But I owed it to Officer Will.

"Hey, Joel," I said, and waved.

He flicked a glance my way. "Oh, hey, Chuck. What brings you by?"

"Heard you're having trouble with Officer Will's old car."

"Yeah. It ain't run at all since the shooting. I thought maybe a bullet hit the gas line or nicked something, but I can't find anything."

"Y'mind if I have a look at her?"

He squinted over the carb at me. "Since when are you a mechanic?"

"I know some stuff about cars," I lied. "Thought maybe I could help out."

"You know you ain't supposed to be here, right? You could get us both in trouble."

"C'mon. We all liked Officer Will. I'd hate to see his car get junked. Just let me see her. Somebody comes in, I'll scram. You can say you never saw me. For Officer Will, man."

Joel chewed on his lip. I think my mentioning Officer Will got to him. He and Car 17 were the closest thing we'd ever had to a legend.

"Yeah, okay," he said finally. "Guess it couldn't hurt to have a fresh eye look at it." He pointed the carb at me. "But anyone shows up, you're gone. Got it?"

I promised to stay invisible. Joel took me outside and led me around the corner.

They'd towed 17 to the garage after the shooting, and worked on her for hours at a stretch. But days of mechanicking turned up zilch. Then there were other vehicles with stalled engines and blown gaskets and burnt wires, real fixable stuff, and 17 was taking up a bay. So they rolled her out back and left her sit. Not on the junk heap yet, but right on the edge.

"Y'need anything?" Joel asked, skeptical-like.

"Just some tools. I may have to get under her."

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Joel shrugged and trudged back inside. Meanwhile I just stood there and eyed Will's car. She was a Chevy Impala, like most of the cruisers they had back then. Today Haberville uses Ford Crown Vics, but back then it was Chevy all the way. I popped the hood and poked around so I'd look like I was doing something useful.

Couple minutes later Joel returned, toting a creeper and toolbox. "I never saw anything wrong in there," he said. "How about you?"

I can change my own oil and that's about it. "I don't think it's in here," I said. "I have an idea, though, but I'll have to root around a little. It could take some time."

"It's gonna take until five, 'cause that's when I leave," he informed me. "When I leave, you leave. No argument."

Two, three hours. Maybe enough. "Okay. I'll see what I can do."

"Yeah." Joel pursed his lips at the cruiser. "Be nice if you could do something. I always liked this car. It always ran real sweet."

"Yeah. I know."

"Yeah? Where were you, front seat or back?" He laughed and punched my arm, like he did when I was twelve, but nowhere near rough enough to hurt. "I'll come get you when I'm ready. Try not to break anything."

"Thanks." I waited till he went back in the garage, then climbed onto the creeper and rolled myself underneath. I left the hood up and the toolbox open and took a spanner with me. All camouflage. I wasn't planning on doing any real work. I just didn't want anybody to see me. It might get a bit tough to explain.

Today Haberville's pretty built up — we got expensive housing developments and our own Target and everything — but way back when, we were still right on the edge of rural. We had a feed store in town, and an old played-out quarry out on Wanner Road where we weren't supposed to hang out but everybody did. We weren't big enough to rate two cops in a patrol car, but then, crime in Haberville was mostly of the speeders and Saturday-night drunks variety. Maybe a knife fight now and then, to liven things up a bit.

Will Jamison grew up on my block. By the time I was eleven, when it all happened, he was already a cop. He'd come home to Sunday dinner with his ma every weekend he wasn't on duty, then take a stroll around the neighborhood, riding us kids for stupid stuff like, "Your shoe's untied,

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that's a misdemeanor" and we'd jeer back with, "Hey, where's your gun?" (which he never wore on visits home) and we'd all laugh and he'd tell us stories about what cops did and that. Those were good times.

Will had a funny streak too. I mean ha-ha funny, not weird funny. But you had to wonder sometimes. A lot of the stories he told us were just plain piles of BS. Like that yarn he spun about how he got Car 17. According to him, cop cars didn't come off the lot; they ran wild, in herds, and you had to rope and ride your own and break it like a bronc. Like the Texas Rangers, he told the littler, gullible kids. You and your horse are buddies and ride the range together, looking for outlaws. We use cars now, not horses, but it's the same thing.

But that wasn't all, he went on. You want a car that won't break down or quit on you in the middle of a high-speed chase, or when the lead starts flying. You want a car you can trust your life to. So I put a spell on mine, he said. He related how after he brought 17 in off the range, he soaped her up and hosed her down in an empty parking lot under a full October moon, to wash all the bad stuff out of her, then rubbed on two coats of wax, to seal the good stuff in. Then he put his hands on the borough seal they'd put on her driver's side door, and spoke the magic words of the police department: to protect and to serve.

And that was that, he wrapped it up. She was mine after that. Why, if we didn't lock her in the garage, she'd follow me around like a puppy and wag her trunk like a tail.

Even the littler kids weren't dumb enough to swallow that. "Yeah, that's a ripe one," my brother used to say while holding his nose. We all held our noses for that story. But that was the one that stuck with me the hardest, not so much then, but later on. It sure helped explain a lot of things.

Officer Will never had a serious girl that we knew of, but he loved cars from the time he could push Hot Wheels across the kitchen floor. Car 17 was his baby. He treated her like a princess, kept the oil changed and the engine tuned and slipped her special at the pump when the cops were supposed to use regular. "He'd take it to bed with him if it'd fit," his mother used to complain. But he'd been that way with the beat-up Ford he'd rescued and rebuilt back when he was a kid. It's how he was with cars.

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And the car paid him back. We started hearing stories around — not Officer's Will's tall tales, but stuff from other people, some of 'em cops. The kind that make you shake your head and go *nah* or *yeah, now pull the other one*. Like the high-speeder Officer Will got on the interstate. The guy ran a stop sign, and when the cops tried to pull him over he took off. Got up on the highway and ran it all the way up to one hundred and fifty, with Officer Will right on his tail. "I didn't know our cars could go that fast," some other cop said later. The chase ended when 17 tapped the speeder from behind and sent it into a spin. The car ran off the road and rolled. Turns out the driver, who wasn't hurt, had a couple pounds of pot in his trunk. That back-end tap is a neat maneuver, we all seen it used on *Top Cop Videos*. We wanted to know where Officer Will learned it. "I didn't," he said, in his version of the story. "She just kind of got away from me. The thrill of the chase, you know."

Then there was that other story, the one people wondered and whispered about. The one neither one of us could shrug off because the both of us seen it. Officer Will wouldn't tell that one. I think it scared him a little. I know it scared the crap out of me. But love and duty *are* kinda scary, when you stop to think about it.

IT STARTED WITH a hit and run on Falmouth Street, out at the edge of town. Some drunk wobbling along the berm near Mosley's Bar got himself mowed down. At least, the cops reported, that's what the tire tracks said, 'cause nobody witnessed anything. A couple of guys in the bar thought maybe they remembered hearing a car engine around the time the guy got hit, but that was all. No squeal of brakes, no thump. The cops found flecks of green paint on the guy, and put out a call to local garages to let 'em know if somebody brought in a dented green car, but nothing came of it.

Then some kids out partying in Sell's Park said some nutcase came after 'em and tried to run 'em down. One kid got clipped and had some bad bruises, but otherwise he was okay. A cop, not Officer Will, passed by right then, and the other car took off. The kids said the car might've been green, but it's tough to tell when it's going on midnight and you've been knocking back beers for the last couple hours. Somebody remembered a

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big dent in the passenger-side door, but nobody saw the driver clear. It was like the car didn't have a driver.

This prompted recollections of Officer Will's best ghost stories, about rogue cars that prowled the streets hunting pedestrians. These were cars that had been in hit-and-runs and caught a taste for blood. They'd slip out of their owners' driveways at night and go roaming around for victims. Or the wild cars, the would-be cop cars that never got caught, that would creep into town and attack people, like man-eating tigers. To stop them, you had to cut their gas lines, then stuff the tank with sugar so the evil wouldn't come back. The little kids passed these stories around like baseball cards, but I was going on twelve by then and didn't buy it no more. Not all that much, anyway.

Then the green car ran down an old lady in the street, right in the middle of the afternoon, and it stopped being funny real quick.

This was right by the grocerette, so there were plenty of witnesses. By all accounts, the car had been parked at the curb with nobody near it, and didn't make a move until the old lady started crossing the street. People said it was the squeal of the tires that turned their heads around. That green car peeled away from the curb and went at her at top speed, they said. No swerves, no brakes. Hit her head on, ran over her and lit out. No accident. Just pure and simple murder.

Of course people looked for a license number. We've all been trained by TV cop shows. According to the witnesses, the car had no plates. Nobody could even remember if it was a two-door or a four-door. Nobody got a look at the driver, either. In fact, nobody could remember seeing a driver. Not even hands on the wheel.

Speculation flew all over town like crows at a dump heap. Some crazy kid. Some psycho guy. Some twisto who'd seen too many movies. Some high school science geek who'd rigged a car so he could steer it by remote control and now was out for revenge. That didn't explain the victims, 'cause there wasn't any connection, but the cops still took it all down.

The little kids, of course, decided it had to be one of Officer Will's wild cars that'd gone bad and was out killing people, and they begged Officer Will to hunt it down and catch it.

"We're all on the case," he reassured us, and he wasn't kidding around. Haberville had about nine-ten cops back then, and every one of

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them came by to check out the scene of the crime. This wasn't some drunk or druggie weaving his car around the roads anymore. This was deliberate murder. You don't commit murder in Haberville, not with our cops on the job.

Officer Will got to the grocerette within an hour of the first report. He parked 17 across the street from where the green car had been sitting and checked in with the ranking officer. The duty cops still milled around and warned people to go on home, folks, show's over. The old lady had already been carted off in an ambulance. That didn't stop people like me and the other kids from hanging around to see what was up. Not that much was left, just a few oil stains on the tar by the curb, and some other stains, that weren't oil, in the middle of the street.

The duty cops questioned witnesses and jotted down notes, while the others, like Officer Will, listened in but didn't interfere. They were done quick, and after one last shoo-off to the lookie-loos they went back to their cruisers.

"Hey," one of the duty officers called to Officer Will. "Get your car off the crime scene."

"What are you talking about?" Will said. "She's clear. I put her right over — "

He pointed to the empty curb. Empty because 17 wasn't there anymore. While the cops were grilling people she'd slipped out of park and rolled across the street. I don't remember seeing her move; I'd been watching the cops work, like everybody else. But there she was, with her back end sticking out in the street. Her front end sat right over the oil stains left by the green car. Like she was trying to pick up the scent.

Officer Will got in and moved her, and the cops scraped up samples and did what they could, but without a better description than "green car" or a license plate number, what they could do didn't amount to much. The old lady's family put up a reward of $1,000 for anybody who could tell them who owned the green car. Officer Will asked us kids to keep our eyes open and come straight to the cops if we saw anything. And no more playing in the street.

A couple of us did prowl around town, giving the squint to any car that had even a speck of green on it. Part of it was to help out Officer Will, but — yeah, I admit it — a lot of it was the reward. A thousand bucks is like

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all the money in the world when you're ten or eleven. And it was summer, and we were out of school. What else was there to do?

So we rode our bikes for hours on end, and went places we probably shouldn't've, and bugged the bejesus out of the grownups and phoned in all sorts of tips. Like Danny Feinberg, who turned in his brother's girlfriend's cousin 'cause the guy had a green VW. A Beetle, yet. Truth is, we weren't even sure what kind of car we were looking for, just that it was green and maybe had a dent in the door.

But nobody turned up squat. None of the tips panned out, and nobody got the reward. I heard through my brother, who heard through Joel, that the cops were working with the DMV and checking up on anybody who owned a green car of any year, make or model. The auto body places swore up and down they hadn't worked on any green cars, or repainted any to some other color.

Some sicko from out of town, was Dad's opinion. Some asshole passing through. Probably in Nevada by now, running down people on the Vegas strip, or headed for southern California to join the rest of the crazies.

Funny about the driver. Nobody remembered seeing anyone behind the wheel. I guess when a car's bearing down on you all you can see is the grill. The driver kinda gets crowded out of your memory. Or maybe the car had tinted glass or something, like a Mafia car or a spy car. That started a whole other line of rumors, like the mob was trying to move into Haberville and these were all hits. What a drunk and some high school kids and an old lady buying bananas had to do with the mob, nobody had a real answer for.

So we went on looking for a dented green car. You figure if you find the car, the driver will have to turn up.

Things stayed quiet for almost two weeks. The big rush of leads petered out, and people stopped jumping every time some jerk revved his engine. We figured maybe Dad'd been right, it was just an asshole passing through. Then the car attacked again, and this time it went for a kid.

Little Andy Klosky. I knew him. His brother Mike and I played softball. Mike and his buddy Ed went out to the quarry on Wanner Road to sneak smokes, and Andy tried to tag along. They told him to get lost. He was maybe eight years old then, to Mike's eleven, still young enough to bawl and pitch a fit and threaten to tell their mom. Mike chucked a

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pebble at him and called him a baby and swore to pound him to hell and back if he squealed to anybody. The kid went off, still crying, with lots of You'll be sorries flung back over his shoulder.

He ran down the hill toward Wanner Road. They'd come up to the quarry the back way, through the fields and brush, but if you're eight and you're in a hurry to get your older brother in trouble, Wanner Road's the quickest way home. Soon's he was out of sight Mike and Ed forgot about him and tried to light up the Marlboros Ed had pinched from his dad.

They heard the scream first, high and thin and too far away.

Then the roar of the engine.

They both knew what was up. The green car and the hit-and-runs were all anybody talked about. They both jumped up and tore down the hill to where the gravel drive that leads into the quarry turns into Wanner Road. They came in on the tail end of disaster: little Andy lying on the road, crying, with his shirt ripped and blood on his face and knees and elbows, and the green car just kind of oozing along the macadam, like it was stalking him.

Mike yelled something and charged at the car. Ed, when he told his version later, said he was right behind Mike, but I don't know, I mean, it wasn't *his* kid brother about to get squashed. They both agree that Andy scrambled up when he heard Mike's voice and started bleating for his brother. Maybe the car was scared it might lose out on its victim, because it stopped its farting around and shot straight after Andy.

Lucky for everybody Wanner Road is a piece of crap at the best of times, and doesn't get borough maintenance that often. The car hit a pothole — one of those hefty ones that can knock a muffler loose — and that threw its aim off. The bumper missed Andy by maybe an inch, Ed said. If it wasn't for that pothole, Andy would've been gloop on the blacktop.

By that time Mike had got hold of Andy and dragged him off the road and back up into the grass. He figured the driver would take off, now that there were witnesses around. But that didn't happen. Damned if that car didn't wheel around, Mike said, and aim its grill at him and Andy, and them with nowhere to run.

That's when Ed redeemed himself, or shook off his shock, or got really, really stupid, or all three. He ran at the car from the side and tried to yank open the passenger door. Don't ask me what he was thinking.

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After the reward money, maybe. The door was locked or stuck or something and wouldn't budge, but Ed got a good look inside. Then the car roared its engine and leaped like a panther. Ed lost his grip and went flying into the weeds. The front end just missed Mike and Andy, but the back end tagged Mike a solid one on the hip as it fishtailed past. It shot up Wanner Road and disappeared.

This was back before everyone in the world had a cell phone, so they had to limp themselves over to the nearest house and ask if they could use the phone to call the cops. The lady who lived there took one look at 'em and dialed 911 on the spot. They got our cops, state cops, an ambulance, and I think the Fire Marshal, and the Channel 14 Action News Van. The green car got bumped up from local menace to six o'clock headline.

Little Andy was okay, turns out. He just had some scrapes and bumps and was scared half to death. Mike had it worse: that last tap from the car's rear end came near to busting his hip. They had to take him and Andy in the same ambulance 'cause they wouldn't turn loose of each other.

Ed was okay too, just a bunch of bruises. He didn't tell the grownups anything, not even our cops. Maybe if Officer Will'd been there he might've spoke up. But he was off-duty then so Ed didn't, except to say it was the green car for sure, and to point out which way it went.

Mike and Andy got to stay overnight at the hospital, but they sent Ed home after maybe an hour. Then we all got together and he told us everything, from snitching his dad's Marlboros to watching the car tag Mike before it flew up Wanner. And he told us what he saw inside when he looked through the window.

"Nobody. There wasn't nobody driving. I thought maybe it was some kids hid down on the floor and pushing the pedals, y'know? So I even looked there. But there wasn't nobody. Swear to God."

OUR COPS and the staties beat the bushes for maybe three hours without turning up anything. And I knew they weren't going to. Y'see, after Ed told his story I got to thinking. About cars gone feral. Cars with a taste for blood. Cars that hated us because we made them to carry us around and serve us. A car like that's not gonna be found unless it wants to be.

Two weeks back, while everybody else was out poking around

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parking lots and side streets with thoughts of rewards in their heads, I was cruising my bike around the edge of town, on the gravel roads and maintenance lanes and dirt drives. In the wild places. Most of them dead-ended into brush tangles or narrowed out into game trails, but for a couple of dozen yards or so stayed wide enough to hide a car.

I'd been up by the quarry before, but didn't find anything. But then, I hadn't stayed long. Because I'd heard something like a growl, and caught a glimpse of a shine in the undergrowth. Probably a dog, with the sunlight glinting off its eyes. Or maybe that growl was an engine, and the gleam I glimpsed was headlights. I don't know for sure because I lit out of there and didn't look back. I didn't tell anybody 'cause I didn't want to get razzed for going wussy. But maybe if I'd said something to Officer Will, Mike and Andy wouldn't've ended up in the hospital.

So there I was, on my bike, out on Wanner Road. I wasn't thinking about any reward, at least, not all that much. Mostly I was thinking about Ed's eyes when he told us what he saw, or didn't see, through the green car's window. And I thought about wild cars, and Officer Will, and what Mike and Andy could've looked like.

Wanner Road runs straight as a pin off 2nd Street in town right on up to the quarry. Then it doglegs right and kinda meanders around the hillside a while before it spills out onto Coventry Pike. The quarry's got a gated fence, but there's a fire road a couple yards farther on that the deer hunters use. Come the end of November you see pickup trucks parked along it in the morning, sometimes two abreast. If it's wide enough for two side-by-side pickups, a car could slide in with no trouble.

The cops were all gone when I got to the quarry. It was coming up on late afternoon by then. I was walking my bike up the gravel drive when I heard a car on the road. I got me and my bike up into the trees just in time. Car 17 tooled up Wanner like she meant serious business, with Officer Will behind the wheel. I'm sure the other cops had told him they'd already combed the place. But that was Officer Will. Had to check it out for himself.

Car 17 slid around the potholes smooth as mama's stockings, almost like she could see 'em. When she slowed, my heart rate speeded up, and I shrank back further under the trees. I was sure he'd spotted me. But he was just eyeing the gate. Car 17 turned in at the entrance and trundled to a stop on the gravel, and Officer Will got out.

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Nobody'd worked the quarry since my grandpop was my age, but there were still sheds and a garage and enough bare spots to park a car. Even though the cops hadn't found him, they probably figured the green car's whacko driver was hiding out up there. It wouldn't be the first time some bum or group of bums or whatnot had set up living quarters there and had to be rooted out.

Officer Will had a big iron key that he tried on the gate. It took him a bit of grunting and twisting, but he finally jiggled it open. It swung in with a screech that clawed at my ears and told the whole world they were here. Officer Will thinned his eyes at the road and the trees and the decrepit quarry buildings. Then he went in, murmuring into his hand radio. Car 17 stayed outside the fence.

I let him get a ways inside, then I left my bike and started sneaking through the trees over to the fence so I could see. By now I was telling myself the cops had it right, some sick bum was holed up here and he was using his car to run people down. He went after Mike and Andy and Ed because they got too close to his hideout. Ed and what he said he saw was just a load of crap. Cars don't drive by themselves.

I couldn't see from where I was, so I edged along the fence to over by the gate. I scrunched down in the weeds and hoped Officer Will wouldn't notice me. I was being really stupid, worse than Ed even. He might've shot at me by accident. But hey, I was eleven then. You expect a kid to have sense?

I was at the gate and peering through it when a bomb went off behind me. Least, that's what it sounded like. I almost jumped out of my skin through my scalp. I know I let loose a shriek. Turns out it was 17 backfiring. A shut-off car with its engine cooling doesn't backfire. It can't. But I didn't think of that till way later.

Anyway, both of us whirled, me with my one hand still clutching the fence. That's when we spotted the green car, crawling up the drive toward us, quiet as a ghost. Car 17's backfire had wrecked its ambush.

The green car wasn't happy about getting found out, and it let us know it with a big engine rev that sounded like a tiger roaring. It didn't accelerate. It lunged. Right up the drive, right through the open gate, right at Officer Will.

Officer Will yelled into his radio and clawed for his service pistol,

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then dove for cover. The car shot by him and nearly rammed a toolshed, but veered off just in time. I could see the steering wheel spinning, with no hands on it. No driver. I could see that clear. I could hear it, too, in the rasp of its engine and the scrape of its tires on the grit. Nobody started this car, or steered it, or parked it or put on its brakes. It had run to wildness, gone feral, and it found it liked the taste of human blood. Kids or cops, anything would do. It chugged and coughed and set its tires for another run.

Now Officer Will had his gun out, and he was firing at the tires. One bullet pinged off the bumper, but another hit the front left tire dead on and punctured it. That just made the car's engine growl all the nastier. Didn't slow it down any, either. It went right for him on three good tires and one flabby donut of rubber. He held his ground and kept shooting, aiming at the grill now, trying to hit the carb or the battery or some other mechanized vital organ.

I hung onto the fence with my feet stuck tight to the ground, like I was one of the weeds twined around the chainlink. It was Officer Will and the green car, with just his gun between them.

He held his ground a bit too long. The car came at him and he dodged. It clipped his side and sent him spinning. He hit hard and didn't get up. The green car raced on right through the gate, then hit the drive and swung around. I swear to God, it favored that bad tire, like a dog with a hurting paw. But it wasn't done yet. It set its sights on Officer Will and pointed its grill dead at him. Then it leapt forward again.

Car 17 rammed it in the side.

She was parked. Her engine was off. But she moved and she moved with a purpose. She hit the green car and knocked its aim off and sent it careening almost into the fence. Then she rammed it again, a body blow to the passenger side. Its bad tire popped with a crack like a gunshot. One of her headlights tinkled, and dripped shards of glass like blood as she backed away.

The green car screamed. I swear it screamed. A big long whistle like a teakettle, or maybe a hot radiator. It limped around and glared at 17 through its headlights. She'd positioned herself in the center of the yard, between the green car and Officer Will, who still lay stunned on the ground. They were partners, and she had his back.

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The green car took a run at her. She leapt to meet it. They hit full on like a couple of bull elk in rut, with one almighty crash. Car 17 eased back, with her hood all crumpled and her bumper askew. But the green car had taken the worst of it. When it lurched aside, it left a trail of oil, and I think maybe brake fluid. Its engine made a high thin noise that had all sorts of mad in it. Car 17 made no noise at all, except for the crunch of her tires on the gravel.

The green car was still for a minute, then it kind of sidled along the fence like it wanted to get to the gate. Car 17 angled to block it. Suddenly it flew into reverse, and slid past her before she could stop it. It ran backwards at full speed, aimed at Officer Will.

He was up on his knees by now, groping around for his gun. He found it just as the car came at him. He rolled like mad out of its way, then snapped off a pair of shots. At least one bullet, maybe both, hit the other front tire. The green car skidded and lurched, and its front end scraped dirt for a couple of seconds.

Then 17 charged in. She was all over that car like a bad case of rust, ramming and slamming. It tried to go for Officer Will again, and she sideswiped it a good one. The green car made one last run for the gate, but with both front tires gone it couldn't do better than a hobble.

Car 17 moved up alongside it and herded it over to the fence. She used her body to wedge it in tight. Up against the wall, sleazebag. The green car's engine made wheezy crackling noises, like it was cursing, or crying.

Officer Will moved up in a crouch, yelling, "Out of the car! Out of the car now!" His face was gray as old paste. Guess he wasn't used to his own car catching the bad guy without him. But he patted her crumpled hood before he moved in on the green car. "Hold him," he said. I heard that clear as day. Her engine purred in response. Officer Will grabbed hold of the passenger door handle and flung the door wide and aimed his gun in.

"Christ Jesus," he said. He slammed the door. No *Down on the ground and hands on your head.* That wasn't going to happen. I think he knew that before he opened the door. He patted 17's hood again, and I saw his mouth go *Thanks.* Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a jackknife. Because the only way to kill an evil car is by cutting its gas line.

And that's when the green car went for broke. It squealed away from the fence, and left a long scrape of paint on Number 17's side and a long

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strip of chrome on the ground. It reared up on its good back tires, full speed in reverse. It never slowed or swerved. That's just how it went over the edge of the quarry. I didn't see it go in, but I heard the splash.

I turned loose of the fence then and ran inside. I had to see. Officer Will and I reached the edge at about the same time. We were just in time to watch the green car's front end sink out of sight in the water.

I don't know how long I stared at the ripples, but when I finally looked away I saw Officer Will staring at me. "Chuck?" he said. "You've been here all along?"

"Yeah," I said. Oh crap, was I in for it.

He moved his mouth around a lot, like he was trying a couple of sentences on for size, but discarding them before they got to be words. Finally he said, "A crime scene's no place for a kid. Get your ass out of here."

"Yessir." And I ran, with a wide detour around 17. I swear her one good headlight glared at me.

I made it back to my bike just as the first backup unit came racing up Wanner Road. I pedaled home like I was jet-propelled. I threw my bike on the lawn and ran upstairs and didn't come out of my room until after dinner. I couldn't. Every time I heard a car I'd start shaking and my skin would go goosebumpy. I couldn't go down in front of Mom and Dad like that. Call me wussy if you want to, but I say I was entitled.

What finally got me out of my room was Dad roaring up the stairs at me to come down and see this. "This" was the story on the news. It was all over local channel 14 for a good twenty minutes at least. They'd dredged the green car out of the quarry. It was all banged up and battered and hung on the end of the hoist like a big dead fish.

Some cop's face, Captain Somebody, filled the screen. He said they'd got a tip and tracked the homicidal driver to the quarry. After a tense shootout, the driver ran his car off the edge. Whether it was suicide or a botched escape attempt, the captain wasn't making a guess. A team of divers was on the way, he said, to search the quarry bottom for the driver's body. He was specific on *body*. No way anybody could've survived that plunge, and the water temperature was like minus subzero down there. That's why you kids shouldn't be swimming in there, he told the camera. These places are dangerous.

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The interview was all him. Officer Will stood off in the background and didn't say much of anything. Mostly he stayed next to 17, checking over her damage. Maybe talking to her. Comforting her. It was hard to tell.

I found out later Officer Will cut the green car's gas line and put a bullet through its engine soon's they got it to the surface. Nobody tried to stop him. The car didn't go to impound, either. They towed it straight to the junkyard, with a full police escort. By the time the update aired on the eleven o'clock news, the green car had been destroyed.

THE CASE of the Hit and Run Homicides, as the papers played it up, made the front page of every daily and a couple of weeklies for about twenty miles around. The official story was, it was some nutcase from out of town who used his car to kill at random. The cops had frogmen scouring the quarry, but the pit ran deep and there were all sorts of holes and hangups down there, so they didn't expect to find a corpse.

Two nights later Officer Will dropped by our place. He assured Mom I wasn't in any trouble and asked if he could talk with me a minute. We went out on the front porch and chatted about nothing until Mom stopped peering through the curtains and went away.

First thing I did when we hit the porch was stare at the curb. Officer Will had brought his personal car, an old Jag he was nursing back to hot status. He saw where I was looking, but didn't say anything until Mom left. "She's in the shop. That mother banged her up something fierce."

"But she's okay?"

He peered down at me kinda funny. "Yeah. She'll be okay."

We didn't say anything for a while. Then he got right to the point. "You saw the news?"

"Uh-huh."

"They won't find a driver."

So he wasn't going to try yanking me. I told you he was cool. "Because there wasn't any driver. Was there?"

He was staring at the curb too, at the Jag sitting there all quiet and normal. Just a car. "I don't have any explanations, or I'd offer one. The wild car theory's the best I can do, and that's just a fairy tale. What I need to know is what you're telling the other kids."

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"Nothing. I didn't say a word. And I'm not going to." Except maybe later to Ed, in private, so he wouldn't go crazy and get locked away or something. He saved Mike and Andy. We owed him. "I'm eleven. That doesn't mean I'm stupid."

He accepted that. But I had to ask. "So what about 17?"

That got me a shrug, and his full-on smile. "What can I say? She's a cop."

We had a laugh, then he left. The next day I had an earnest talk with Ed, and we swore on our souls never to tell. Days passed and no body turned up at the quarry. Then somebody knocked over the convenience store on Coventry Pike, and life got back to normal. The Hit and Run Homicides dropped off the news and gradually faded away.

The average cop car, Joel told me once, only stays in use about three years. But Officer Will wouldn't give up 17. He even offered to buy her. So the borough kept her in service. As long as she wanted to run, they were willing to let her.

About five years after the fight at the quarry, Officer Will responded to a domestic disturbance call. On Wanner Road, of all places. Some guy got to fighting with his wife, and it spilled outside. Officer Will tried to calm the guy down. The guy pulled a gun and shot him three times point blank in the chest. Car 17 ran up onto the lawn and rammed the guy and pinned him up against the side of his own house and held him there until backup arrived. Officer Will died at the scene.

After the guy got lugged off to jail and the ambulance took Officer Will, they tried to move 17. She wouldn't budge. Her engine wouldn't even turn over. They couldn't figure out what was wrong 'cause she hadn't even been shot at. Finally the borough sent a tow truck, and they hauled her to the garage.

That was the story of Officer Will and Car 17. I'd never told the whole thing through to anybody, but I told it to her, lying there under her chassis where no one but she could hear me. Reminding her of what she was and what she meant to us. "I know you're hurting. We all are. We all miss him. But you're different. You're a cop. You have to go back out there. It's your duty. He wouldn't want you rusting out behind some garage. He'd want you out on the street, stopping speeders and killer cars and stuff. Protecting and serving, like it says on your door. You can't just let that go."

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She didn't make any noises, so I don't know if she was listening. But I heard footsteps on the gravel. One set was Joel's sneakers. The other was boots. "Okay, kid," somebody said. "Get out of there."

I rolled out from under 17. The boots belonged to Herschel Wertz, Simpson's son-in-law and the guy who ran Simpson's Garage. Joel's boss. Joel was standing next to him and looking about ten years old, more scared for his job than for me. "He said he could fix her," he babbled. "I'm really backed up, and there's nobody here, and I know him and he's okay with cars, so I — "

"Broke the rules," Wertz cut him off. Joel shut up. The guy looked at me, then at 17. I think his eyes softened, just a little. Everyone had liked Officer Will. "Any luck with her?" he asked me.

"I dunno," I said. "I did what I could."

He nodded. "You're Chuck, right? I've heard good things about you. But don't push it again. Now get lost." I bobbed my head and ducked past him, but he'd already turned his glare on Joel. "As for you — "

Whatever Joel meant to blather got lost in the rumble of 17's engine turning over. It stopped me cold and dropped Joel's jaw. Wertz went "Huh?" and ambled over to look.

Her hood was still up. There was her engine, purring away, all her belts and pistons running like they were supposed to.

"You said you couldn't find anything wrong with her," Wertz said to Joel. "Maybe I should give the kid your job."

"It was just a couple wires," I said. "Could've got knocked loose anywhere. Joel would've found 'em the minute he put her up on the rack."

"Uh-huh." Wertz peered down at the engine. Joel sidled around him and stuck his hand in through the open driver's side window. Car 17's engine shut off. Wertz looked from Joel to me, then to 17. "I'll cut you both a break this time. Get that car roadworthy so we can get it back to the department. You know how much them things cost?"

He stalked off toward his office, head cocked to watch us to make sure we followed. We dutifully trotted after him. Joel's face was pasty, and he wouldn't look back at 17. Maybe he was thinking, like I was, how her keys were still in his pocket.

* * *

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They got Car 17 a new partner and put her back out on the street. The new cop's name was Tanya Munoz; she transferred in from Collier. Joel said she had a solid record as a cop. I wondered how well she knew cars.

Pretty well, it turned out. Her dad had been a mechanic. She took her new job seriously, and treated her patrol car with respect. Pretty soon the stories started cropping up again: robbers busted, carjackers thwarted, speeders chased down and caught by the lady cop in the car that did things it shouldn't've. Officer Tanya took it in stride. "A cop's a cop," she said to a bunch of us once, and patted 17's hood. "The lady and I are here to get the bad guys off the streets. Make the world a safer place for you kids. And speaking of safety, you on the bike, why aren't you wearing a helmet?"

No need to worry about Officer Tanya and her car. They were both in good hands.

SO THAT'S HOW it happened, back when I was eleven, and back when I was sixteen. No, it didn't make me want to be a cop, or a mechanic. I'm aiming to become a teacher. Who'd've imagined that?

The end came while I was away at school. Joel told me about it. There was some accident, and Officer Tanya and Car 17 were racing to the scene. Some guy on a cell phone ran a stop sign and plowed into them. Car 17 got knocked into the path of a truck, and her front end got smashed all to hell. Officer Tanya was pretty banged up, too, but she still crawled out of the wreckage and insisted on arresting the guy before the EMTs loaded her into the ambulance. "I never saw her," the other driver insisted, even though she had her lights on and her siren blaring. I heard he was thinking of suing the borough, something about speeding police putting innocent people at risk.

They took Officer Tanya to the hospital and 17 to the garage. Joel wasn't working there anymore, but he still knew people. When he heard about Car 17, he went down to the garage and they let him in, like he'd let me in umpteen years ago.

It was bad, he told me. Her frame was skewed, and her engine was cracked in three places. But the worst, he said, was when he touched her. She'd always felt a little warm to the touch, he said, especially on the

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hood, even when the engine'd been off for hours. Now it just felt like cold, dead metal. "Dead" being the word that rang hardest in his mind.

There was no fixing her, so they scrapped her. Took her to the junkyard and crushed the remains. Whatever'd been in her was long gone by then, so I don't think she felt anything.

I went by the graveyard my last trip home, to check out a rumor I'd heard. It turned out to be true. Somebody'd put a car's steering wheel on Officer's Will's grave, leaning up on the headstone. The maintenance crew had left it there, and no mourners or kids had touched it.

I wanted it to be 17's, so I told myself it was.

"Sorry, officer, but I just wanted a speeding ticket once in my life."

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

SUPERCALIFRAGILISTICEXPIALIMONSTROUS

WE LIVE IN an age of hyperbole. More specifically, we inhabit a milieu in which the excessive and imprecise language of advertising has numbed us to certain words. Beer, for example, is frequently described as "great." A new model car may be anointed "a masterpiece" of design, and toilet paper is compared to silk. In an effort to upgrade a product's greatness, to differentiate it from the merely great, words are often cobbled together into neologisms such as "cruncheriffic" and "superfabulosity." This mythologizing of the mundane has spilled over into common usage, polluting the language and degrading meanings, so that in conversation we hear terms once reserved for the sublime utilized in connection with a plate of fried rice, a shade of lipstick, or a football player's end-zone dance. Lately this tendency has found its way into our critical language and, as a result, our judgments have suffered, for language is not merely a means of expressing opinion — it also serves as a lens through which we view the world. When that lens becomes clouded, our view becomes blurred and we are more readily persuaded that the Emperor's New Clothes are real.

If I had come to Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* without having heard the attendant hype, not expecting a masterpiece, I might have been pleasantly surprised. Though the movie itself contains few surprises, it is an interesting realization of a contemporary fairy tale. In the beginning, during the final days of the Spanish Civil War, Ofelia (Ivana Baquero), a young girl on the verge of adolescence, travels with her very pregnant mother to a

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country estate that her evil stepfather, Capitán Vidal (Sergi López), is using for a headquarters while he attempts to exterminate a handful of rebels who are still fighting against the fascist regime. To escape the oppression of war and Vidal's savagery, Ofelia flees into a fantasy world wherein she is the reincarnation of Princess Moana, daughter of the King of the Underworld, missing lo these many centuries. Led by a pixie in CGI insect form into an ancient labyrinth, she meets a satyr-like faun, who tells her she must perform three tasks in order to enter her father's kingdom and regain her immortality. The first task — take a golden key from the belly of an immense toad who dwells in a hollow beneath a vast, gnarly tree. The second task demands that she gain access to a banquet hall where a pale, eyeless demon awaits. The third task involves the sacrifice of innocent blood. Intertwined with Ofelia's fantasy, a second story plays out, this being the record of Capitán Vidal's brutal abuse of Ofelia's mother, the villagers, the servants, and the rebels. The two narratives fit together nicely and stand separately, yet some overlapping, a touch of thematic and structural confusion, might have heightened the suspense and made for a more compelling film.

For all there is to admire about *Pan's Labyrinth*, and there is much — the sumptuous, Catholic imagery (feasts and sacrifice and immortal kingdoms); the beautifully realized fecundity of the Underworld; the living mandrake root that Ofelia places beneath her mother's bed to cure her of an illness brought on by pregnancy; the lovely scene when Ofelia tells a story to her brother, who is still in the womb)...for all there is to admire, then, the movie fails to convey the slightest feeling of tension. While it's true that fairy tales have different requirements than do tales of suspense, this particular fairy tale is a two-hour-long film and must be appreciated as such. From the outset we know more or less what will happen; every trope and character is overly familiar and we need something more to help propel us along the well-trodden path of the story. A handful of suspenseful moments do exist, but they are not sufficient to the task, especially considering that one, perhaps the most harrowing of them, is incited by an irresponsible act that seems out of character for Ofelia. Again, neither fairy tale characters nor real people are compelled to be consistent, but Ofelia has been

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set up as thoroughly reliable and her irresponsibility strikes a wrong note that constitutes a jarring break in tone.

The film to which *Pan's Labyrinth* begs to be compared is a legitimate masterpiece, Victor Erice's *The Spirit of the Beehive*, which also tells the story of a young girl who becomes obsessed with a fairy tale (the James Whale version of *Frankenstein*) during the last days of the Spanish Civil War. In *Beehive* (a film del Toro has surely seen), Erice evokes a child's viewpoint so dreamily and elliptically, most of the narrative seems to occur without ever being stated, and nothing is what it appears to be. In *Pan's Labyrinth*, del Toro is stating that this right here is the world and this over here is fantasy; he pays lip service to the fact that both may be real, but this putative ambiguity is over-literalized and thus achieves a kind of moral simplification. Erice's subject matter is more nuanced and allusive than del Toro's, and his blurry-edged, profoundly human vision suggests rather than announces the inexpressible terrors of childhood. In del Toro's vision, the real-world monster, Capitán Vidal, has a fantasy-world analog, the Eyeless Man, and that very equivalence weakens both characters by offering the one as a quasi-explanation for the evil that the other represents, causing me to wish that del Toro had chosen to make either a film about the Spanish Civil War *or* a fairy tale. It's all very neat, but what can we take from the film as it stands, apart from the verities that facism is bad and young children are vulnerable? Ultimately, *Pan's Labyrinth* falls victim to its own hype and comes across as a better than average, visually interesting motion picture, perhaps del Toro's best, but scarcely a film that bears comparison to the classics of modern cinema.

Monster movies are fairy tales with bigger teeth. There is no salient difference between the two forms—they each perform the same allegorical duty. Even nasty latter-day monsters like Hannibal Lecter and his ilk function on some level as moral devices. My favorite monster movies are those made during the fifties and sixties, when aliens, dinosaurs, robots, mutants, and so forth served as stand-ins for the threat embodied by the Cold War. I enjoyed the nihilistic aspects of these films perhaps more than was healthy, delighting in the sight of tiny people being crushed or vaporized or chewed by enormous jaws.

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My first novel, written when I was ten, incorporated an enormous sting ray named Mangoga who surfaced now and again in the waters off Daytona Beach and would lash out with its thousand-foot tail to impale various of my acquaintances. I had, as they say, issues. But then such are the pleasures of youth.

At any rate, now comes a picture that stirs up those old feelings — I'm speaking of Bong Joon-ho's *The Host*. Bong's previous movie, *Memories of Murder*, was a unique police procedural that used as its focal point an unsolved series of serial murders in rural South Korea during the late eighties/early nineties. Slow-moving, rich in detail, leavened with moments of comedy, it succeeded not only in defining the principals involved — suspects, police, and victims — but also created a superb character study of the entire nation under the Orwellian Chun dictatorship. *The Host* is neither slow-moving nor as ambitious, but for a monster movie it is supremely ambitious, layering social satire and a narrative concerning a dysfunctional family into the story of a mutant that surfaces from the Han River near Seoul (the story references an actual event as the cause of the mutation, the dumping of a massive amount of formaldehyde into the river by a mortuary assistant).

The patriarch of the family in question, Hie-bong Park, runs a tiny convenience store on the banks of the Han and takes care of his mildly retarded son, Gang-Du (Song Kang-ho, who played a brutal cop in *Memories of Murder*), and Gang-Du's teenaged daughter, Hyun-seo (Ko Ah-sung). Following an opening section, during which the formaldehyde is shown being dumped six years earlier, these three are watching Hyun-seo's aunt, Nam-ju, on TV, taking part in an archery competition, when the mutant is seen hanging beneath a bridge over the Han. By the time they emerge from the store, the mutant (an amphibious fish-creature with the approximate mass of a step-van) has put to flight hundreds of picnickers and strollers, killing many in the process. After much bloodshed and people-munching, the monster snatches up Hyun-seo in its whip-like tail and swims away. At a mass funeral ceremony for the victims, Hie-bong's other son, Nam-il (Park Hae-il), a former college revolutionary turned unemployed salaryman, blames Gang-Du for Hyun-seo's death and the family's grief devolves into bickering. Things are further complicated when a government

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official announces that the monster carries a deadly virus, quarantines the family and other survivors, and begins fumigating the area. While in quarantine, Gang-Du receives a call from Hyun-seo, made on her failing cell-phone — she is alive, trapped in the immense sewer system beneath the bridge. When the police and the doctors refuse to believe Gang-Du about the call, the family manages to escape from the government and begin hunting for Hyun-seo through the sewers.

Much of the satirical material has an anti-American slant (though it seems equally anti-Korean in that the movie chides Koreans for succumbing to our culture), and this may not appeal to domestic audiences. Some may find certain elements of Korean humor intrusive (though I find interesting the portions of Korean culture that Bong chooses to lampoon). The middle section of the picture is overlong, but Bong keeps the film centered by focusing on Hyun-seo and Gang-Du. Ah-sung's performance is particularly fine, morphing from a schoolgirl whining to her father about (ironically) her ugly cell phone into a resourceful young woman who survives for days in the monster's lair, surrounded by the bodies of those it intends to consume at a later date. The monster itself is a star of at least equal magnitude — capable of a shambling, lurching run on land; of gliding swiftly through the water; and of doing backflips through midair like a gymnast, using its tail to swing from beam to beam as it moves beneath the bridge; it may be the best designed of all cinematic creatures. It is equipped with huge teeth that can bite a man in half, and it also possesses a segmented mouth that allows it to swallow its victims whole and carry them to its lair to save for snack time. This is a monster so fully developed, it manages over the course of the film to develop something of a personality, and it is a testament to its creators (the Orphanage) as much as to the direction that only rarely did I notice I was watching a visual effect.

Bringing the monster onscreen early in the film's first act is just one of the ways in which Bong defies genre conventions, all the while maintaining a reverence for the form, never looking down his nose at the subject matter as is often the case with an homage. Throughout the film there are scenes and moments that exceed our expectations, something that an American genre movie has not achieved to such an

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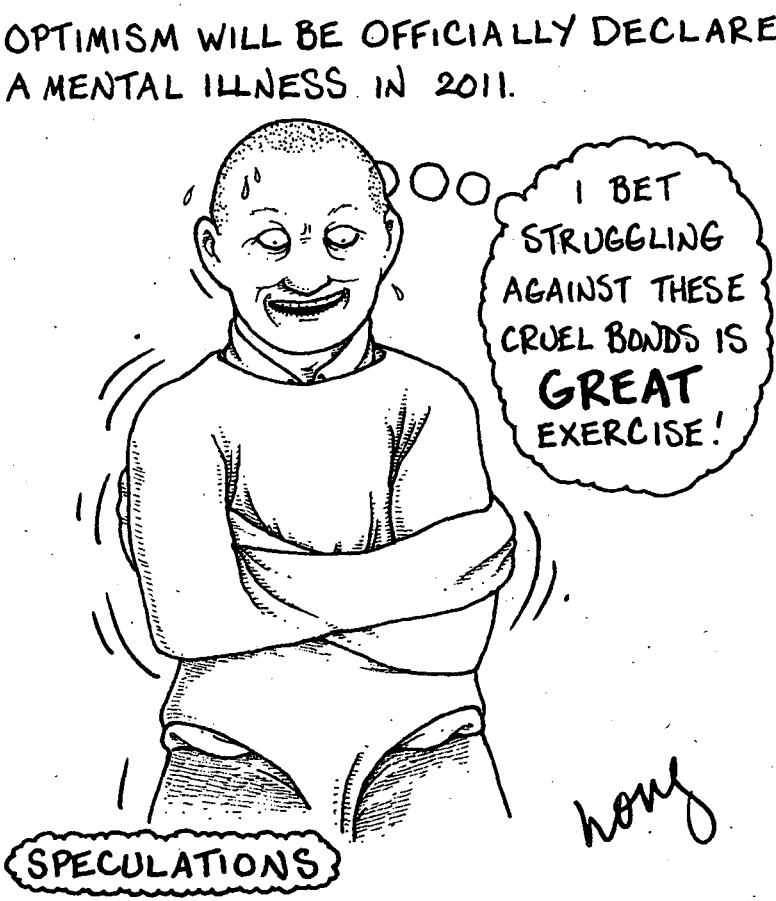
extent since *Alien*. *The Host* is not that picture's equal in its evocation of terror, yet possesses its own signal virtues that more than compensate for this deficiency. If you are a devotee of the sub-genre, I urge you to see the movie and not wait for the American remake, a picture that will inevitably be stripped of the humor and context that give it depth, and doubtless will feature a bigger, gaudier monster that poses a threat not merely to a city but to All Mankind, a creature from which we can be saved only by the intervention of Josh Hartnett. ☙


OPTIMISM WILL BE OFFICIALLY DECLARED A MENTAL ILLNESS IN 2011.
I BET STRUGGLING AGAINST THESE CRUEL BONDS IS GREAT EXERCISE!
SPECULATIONS

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In this issue, we have a few stories that touch on the relationship between humans and their machines. Here we have another one, a tale that looks into the near future to consider what the workplace might be like in times to come.

M. K. Hobson previously published "Domovoi" in our September 2005 issue. She lives in Oregon, in the first city west of the Rockies to be incorporated. And she knows a thing or two about working in an office.

PowerSuit™

By M. K. Hobson

"WHAT SHOULD I WEAR today?" Marshall Graig held up two suits, a dark blue one and a black one, each a classically cut midweight wool-silk blend and completely wireless.

"Go with the blue," suggested his AIgent, whom Graig had named Buddy. "I've got it on good authority that Drock will wear that double-breasted charcoal pinstripe. Awfully risky for someone under thirty. It makes him look like he got into daddy's closet and hasn't come out yet. And there you'll be in blue, looking trustworthy and friendly and decent."

"Blue it is, then," Graig said, humming to himself. *Trustworthy and decent...recent...prescient...*rhymes galloped through his head, but he ignored them. He hung the black suit back in the closet, attaching its power supply to a tiny socket in the suit's cuff button. Those buttons had always been useless, until PowerSuit™ manufacturers had transformed them with high-speed charging sockets.

"With a kicky tie," Buddy added. "So they know you're not a tool or a stooge."

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"How kicky?" Graig asked.

"Less than cartoon characters," Buddy said. "More than stripes."

Graig tucked in his shirt, glancing at a small glowing indicator on the cuff to check the low-wattage connection to the discreet SnapMemory packs in his boxer shorts. Then he gave a command to the sleek European tie-closet. Its elegant grid display showed him his ties, and he eyed them critically, gauging each one's level of kickiness, discarding those at both extremes. Finally, two ties glowed on the smooth screen: one with hot chili peppers on it, the other playfully spattered with nuts and bolts.

"Which?" Graig asked Buddy.

"I like the one with the nuts and bolts."

"You would," Graig said, and was about to touch the screen when Buddy added:

"But that doesn't mean it's the one you should wear."

Graig halted, his finger hovering over the screen.

"Nuts," Buddy explained. "Bolts. There's the unfortunate association with 'nuts' as in 'crazy.' And 'bolts,' as in 'bolt.' As in run away, be untrustworthy...."

Graig punched the image of the tie with hot peppers on it. The European tie-closet gave a satisfied moan and dispensed the tie; Graig slid it around his neck. He crafted a swift four-in-hand and jerked it tight under his chin.

"Very nice," Buddy said. "Now, your brown wingtips are freshly polished...."

Polished...abolished...demolished....

Without a word, Graig took a pair of shoes that were not brown wingtips from the closet. He sat down, slid the shoes on quickly, and began tying them.

His AIgent's reaction was immediate.

"*No,*" Buddy barked, his voice tinged with staticky annoyance. "You are not wearing *The Shoes*."

"Hell I'm not," Graig muttered, staring studiously away from Buddy's impassive viewput.

Graig loved his black-and-white spectator wingtips, with their decorative holes and neatly pinked trim. He adored them passionately. They were his Frank Sinatra shoes. To Graig they suggested the slicked-back

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suavery of an ancient Palm Springs, at a moment sometime just before sunset, driving a huge piece of Detroit steel with the top down. For him the shoes conjured attractive, fuzzy impressions of sturdy men who smoked pipes and crooned, men who drank Manhattans and bussed pliant blonde waitresses on the sly. He loved them and he was going to wear them whether Buddy approved or not.

"They. Are. *Hideous*." Buddy punched each word.

"They are not," Graig countered. He and Buddy could go back and forth like this for hours. But Graig didn't have the time, not with the most important presentation of his career starting in less than an hour. He raised his voice to a warning pitch. "I don't want to hear another word about it!"

"Frank *Sinatra*," Buddy sneered. "A greasy, smirking, self-satisfied *thug*. A mafia-connected crooner. From *New Jersey*."

"Enough!" Graig said. "The shoes are on, and they're staying on. That's the end of it." He paused, then added more softly, "Chairman of the Board, Buddy. Ol' Blue Eyes. My personal hero. The greatest singer who ever lived. He deserves your respect."

"Hah!" Buddy scoffed. "Thug! Smacked around Ava Gardner, and who knows what else! I'm here to guide you to a higher plane in all things. That's my Motivational Imperative. How can I fulfill my MI when you keep going all *individualist* on me?"

"I wore the tie, didn't I?" Graig flicked the fabric under his chin. "Besides, I *do* get to retain free will. At least, that's what it said on your package."

There was a long silence.

Touché, Graig thought.

"I'm wasted on you," Buddy said for the millionth time, synthesizing quite a sulky tone. They were his favorite last words in any situation that was not resolved to his liking.

"Oh, quit moaning and get into the PowerSuit™." This command from Graig indicated that his AIgent should transfer primary function from HomeBased to SuitMobile. The Suit had enough processing power to allow Buddy to operate without the danger of signal interference or outright hacking to which wireless connections were susceptible.

Transfer complete, Buddy said.

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Graig slid on his jacket. The non-acoustic sensors in the collar nestled neatly against his throat for optimal subvocal command recognition. He subvohed to Buddy:

You ready for the presentation of a lifetime?

Buddy, nestled wirelessly in Graig's breast pocket, stirred disapprovingly but said nothing.

Graig rode in to work on the corporate monorail, tense with excitement. A year of frustration and misery was coming to an end. A year of working with Andrew Drock — or, as Graig secretly referred to him, "The Little Prince."

Graig had despised Drock ever since the younger man was assigned the lead on the Guborka project. Sure, it wasn't the sexiest project ever to come through the door at Harshbarger Industries. It was little more than the tidy acquisition of a billion-dollar-a-year competitor somewhere in Uzbekistan and its subsequent retooling to produce higher volumes of widgets at a lower cost per unit. But it was the *principle* of the thing. Graig had seniority, he hadn't worked a week shorter than six days in his whole career, and his non-GAAP EBIDTA analyses were whispered of in hushed and respectful tones around company watercoolers. He was a superior man. The Guborka project should have been his.

But the lead on the project had gone to The Little Prince, and Graig could do nothing but smile and swallow. Sure, his first instinct had been to kick up his feet, blow the project, and leave Drock holding the whole stinking bag. But Buddy had advised him to keep his cool, perform but not ratebust, bide his time.

We'll figure something out, Buddy had soothed. *No need to be rash.*

The project had gone off reasonably well. The competitor was acquired, the plant restaffed and retooled, and cost-contained widgets were pouring off the assembly line with gratifying efficiency.

It was a big win. Now it was time to present their competitor's casket — stuffed with newly minted money and tied up with a shiny red bow — to senior management. It was going to be the feel-good hit of the quarter, with much congratulating and back slapping and "you're a credit to the company"-ing. As the project lead, Drock was going to be on the receiving end of all of it.

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Or at least, Graig reflected with malicious glee, that's what *Drock* thought.

What was actually going to happen was that it was all going to fall in a million sharp-edged shards around Drock's ankles, and the more he tried to step away from the wreckage, the deeper he'd get cut.

The ill-considered charcoal gray pinstripe would be the merest prelude to an avalanche of disaster. There would also be a malfunctioning presentation screen, a blast of ear-splitting static from the room's integrated wall speakers, the accidental launching of a porn-homepaged browser...all engineered by Buddy.

Of course, anyone could have a bad meeting. And Drock could talk himself out of some pretty tight corners.

So Buddy had proposed the psychotic manifestations.

Highly illegal, without a doubt. The kind of thing that could get you fired for sure. *But nothing great was ever accomplished without some risk*, Buddy had said. *You have to break a few eggs to make an omelet.*

Graig found that he agreed wholeheartedly. Especially when the eggs under discussion were Drock's.

Buddy's connections were topnotch. They should be; Buddy was top of the line, the most powerful and sophisticated AIgent money could buy. Graig had mortgaged the first half-decade of his post-graduate salary in acquiring him...it...no, *him*.

Drock, on the other hand, had gone a different route. He'd invested in a full complement of biochips, implanted in his head, muscles, spine; his whole body was wired for brilliant efficiency. Drock's AIgent wasn't anywhere near as sophisticated as Buddy, and didn't need to be (as Drock was fond of reminding Graig) because the chips in his head helped him think better for himself. They enhanced his own natural abilities — which, he argued, was vastly preferable to relying on a superhuman piece of code.

"An AIgent is a psychological crutch that hurts more than it helps," Drock had pontificated. "You just wait, you're going end up with some kind of weird integrative pathology. Functional Attachment Disorder. Happens to every twitchy bastard who relies on code as much as you do. Besides, code can break down."

Well, chips can break down too, thought Graig. And, given that

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Buddy was multiply backed up in no less than a half-dozen rented datastorage lockers, Graig felt he would be in less of a bind if Buddy went down than if a chip in Drock's brain went dark at a critical moment.

Also, chips could be hacked.

Graig's lips curled up slightly, and he must have subvohed without thinking, because Buddy's voice pipped through Graig's Pinnael Seed, the tiny wireless speaker superglued inside his ear canal:

"What are you laughing about?"

Graig replied, singing as best he could through the back of his throat:

"Buddy-boy! They sure named you right...
Life without you would be a fright...
Buddy, you give me fight, might,
You're a total deee-light!"

To the tune of "High Hopes." What do you think?

"Atrocious." Buddy sounded as if he would have gagged, had it been allowed by his programming. "Asinine. Appalling. A brief query of the thesaurus reveals over ten thousand synonyms for the word 'awful' that have direct application to your lyrics. To spare your feelings, I'll restrict myself to the 'A's. Abominable...."

Graig sighed. In his enthusiasm he'd forgotten the scathing contempt in which Buddy held his favorite hobby — songwriting. Graig spent long hours crafting couplets in the darkest hours of night, agonizing over rhymes.

"...Amateurish...."

Graig liked to imagine presenting them to Frank Sinatra in a smoky recording booth, studio musicians on union time sitting around watching, ol' Blue Eyes scratching his head in amazement, "Why, this young cat has some crazy talent for rhyme!"

"...Abhorrent...."

Graig kept all of these fantasies strictly to himself, his lyrics locked up on password-protected personal datashares. But that wasn't enough for Buddy. Buddy hated Graig's "songwriting nonsense"; he disapproved when Graig stayed up late writing lyrics, and he often said that if he never heard another rhyming couplet in his virtual existence, it would be too soon.

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"...Indeed, there's no need to limit oneself to the English language. In Uzbek, several colorful adjectives spring to mind...."

Enough! Graig threw up a hand, narrowly avoiding smacking a fellow monorail passenger. **I make up a song about how swell you are, and all you can do is criticize! I feel sorry for you, I really do.**

"There are so many things psychologically wrong with that statement, I don't know where to begin. You're too attached to me. I am not 'a delight' and I most certainly do not 'give you fight,' whatever that means. I am just an Advanced Support Vector Machine."

Baloney. You're more than an Advanced Support Vector Machine. You're my best friend.

"I'm not supposed to be your best friend!" Exasperation tinged Buddy's voice. "We're supposed to have an amicable working relationship. The relationship of a craftsman and his tool...are you listening to me?"

In fact, Graig wasn't. Buddy's comments had needled him, and he'd already moved on to tweaking the lyrics in his head. Buddy had a point...*give me fight*? What had he been thinking?

"You've heard about Functional Attachment Disorder," Buddy said. "You get all mixed up about who you really love, who you really are — it's dangerous, it really is! People land in the nuthouse over...."

Buddy, you're right outta sight.... No, that didn't scan properly. Maybe a triple rhyme: **Buddy, your sight is quite right....**

"You need some real human attachment," Buddy said, loudly. "You need to quit living in your head!"

But Graig was lost, humming "High Hopes" to himself and wondering if he should just recast the whole thing with "-ate" rhymes instead:

Great, teammate, first-rate, elate....

"I'm wasted on you," Buddy sighed again, for the million-and-first time.

The presentation got underway in a shiny executive meeting room on the top floor of Harshbarger Corporate. Jackson Pollock originals hung on gleaming white walls; a mirror-like table held cut crystal carafes of water. The view from the top was inspiring. They were high above the smog, which draped like a felty blue skirt around the building's midsection.

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Graig sat at the end of the gleaming table, tapping his stylus, waiting with almost unbearable anticipation for Drock to arrive in that stupid charcoal pinstripe. Sprinkled in amongst the usual assortment of stooges, tools, and drones were a few heavy hitters, most notably Gladys Tite, Harshbarger Industries' Chief Marketing Officer. She sat at the other end of the table. She was early, as always.

Gladys Tite was gorgeous, in a whitehot-coals-tied-up-in-brocaded-asbestos kind of way. She had the savagely tailored look universal to women of ambitious persuasion; but unlike most, she looked as if she could actually pull off the trick of transforming herself into a sex-dripping knockout by whipping off her horn-rimmed glasses and shaking down her lustrous chestnut-colored hair. She also looked as if she would never, ever do such a thing.

Graig turned his attention away from her. He couldn't look at her for long without imagining her dressed like Ava Gardner in a white off-the-shoulder dress, a creamy gardenia in her hair. Maybe, if he had been the lead of the Guborka project, instead of Drock...maybe, if it was him giving the presentation today, the one in line for the kudos....

"That's what I'm talking about," Buddy said, noticing Graig's attention. "Real human attachment. You need a girlfriend. You haven't had a girlfriend for months!"

Are you nuts? Gladys Tite? She is so far out of my league, and in such a wide variety of ways...Buddy, just shut up and stay focused!

Graig found it surprising that for once, he was the one lecturing Buddy about filtering out distractions and focusing on the task at hand.

Time? Graig subvohed to Buddy.

"Ten after," Buddy said. "Drock's late."

Then, another sound in his ear; the tiny "blip" of an incoming call.

Answer it, Graig subvohed. **Get rid of whoever it is.**

A moment of silence. Then Buddy "ahem"-ed.

"It's Drock," Buddy said. "You'd better take this."

Drock? A chill passed up Graig's spine. **What the hell?**

"Graig?" Drock's voice was hoarse and thin. "Kid, is that you?"

Graig gritted his teeth. If there was one thing he hated more than anything in life, it was when Drock (who was five years younger) called him kid.

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Where are you? Graig regretted the limitations of subvocalization; he couldn't spit the words with spiteful reproach. **T. Tom will be here any minute.**

"I'm on my way," Drock said, pausing to bark a phlegmy, chest-rattling cough. "But I'm not feeling so hot. Asian Duck Flu. Hundred and five degree fever, and that's with minitherms pasted over my arteries exchanging the heat out as fast as they can. I feel like shit."

Asian Duck Flu? At that moment, Graig was glad of the limitations of subvocalization, because it made the question come out sounding serious and concerned instead of tickled pink. **Are you serious?**

"Serious as Asian Duck Flu," Drock said.

You want me to do the presentation?

"No way," Drock said emphatically. "I can do it...I must do it!"

How about I get it started? Hand it over to you when you get here — *if you're feeling up to it, that is.*

A pause. A hesitation. Graig pushed a little harder.

I hear T. Tom coming down the hallway, he lied. **T. Tom is going to be pissed if he has to sit around waiting for you.**

"All right," Drock said finally, his voice heavy with resignation. "Start the meeting. I'll be there as soon as I can."

I'll do the team proud, Graig promised.

There was a strangled choking sound on the other end of the line, a spasm of coughing or a hilarious death rattle, and then the connection was broken.

Graig leaned back in his chair, glowing.

You hear that? he asked Buddy.

"Of course I did, don't be stupid." Buddy's tone was sharper than usual. Nerves? But Advanced Vector Support Machines didn't get nerves. "I've got everything ready. The presentation, all the materials...."

I've got the presentation down pat, Graig subvohed, as he smiled at Gladys Tite. She sighed and checked the time on her PDA. Graig licked his lips. Then he frowned. He suddenly realized that despite the fact he was going to get all the glory, he also was going to be cheated of the joy of watching Drock fail miserably.

Well, it was better this way. No matter how satisfying it would have been to watch Drock melt down publicly, people might have ended up

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feeling sorry for him. This way, Drock just looked like a weak malingerer with some kind of perverted attraction to Asian ducks. This was perfect.

At that moment, T. Tom Harshbarger breezed in, surrounded by remote functionaries who cyberhabited little floating silver balls. They hovered around him, chattering at him from different directions; he would answer one, push another one away. Once, Graig had seen him smack one right against the wall.

Mr. Harshbarger was the president of Harshbarger Industries, grandson of the founder, the big boss of them all. He was seen very infrequently. He had a big head and shifty eyes, and he gave off a strange smell of bay rum and ozone, like a well-groomed tropical depression.

T. Tom took a seat at the head of the table. He shifted focus away from the little silver balls surrounding him, and his eyes sharpened on Graig. He shot an index finger.

"Go!" he barked.

Graig's heart leapt. He leapt at the same moment, sprinting to the front of the room. From his position at the podium, he touched the microphone with an index finger.

"Good afternoon," he began. "Mr. Harshbarger, thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to attend today's presentation."

Harshbarger inclined his head seigneurially. Graig cleared his throat.

"I regret that my associate, Andrew Drock, cannot be here to deliver this presentation as originally planned."

Graig let this hang ominously, infusing his silence with the implication of insouciant dereliction. It must have been effective; T. Tom's eyebrows knit grumpily.

Graig gestured to the screen behind him.

Go, he subvohed to Buddy.

And nothing went.

A wave of panic, as if his boxer shorts had been dipped in icewater, froze Graig in place. He was aware of T. Tom Harshbarger's hostile and impatient eyes focussed right on his forehead.

Buddy swore to himself. "Hold on. Everything's okay. I reloaded the presentation without errors, but I need to verify...hold on...."

And then, in a rush, the presentation began. Lush images of Uzbekistan

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swept across the screen; high flower-dotted plains, rippling whitecapped rivers, all manner of inspiring natural wonders that hadn't really existed in Uzbekistan for a hundred years. The images were set to swelling, Carmina Burana-ish harmonies that featured ancient Slavic voices intoning mystic sentiments about how excited all of Uzbekistan was at the arrival of Harshbarger Industries.

Graig's heart unclenched all at once, releasing a dizzying flood of blood to his brain. While the multimedia introduction played out, he subvohed angrily to Buddy,

What are you trying to do, give me a heart attack?

"Sorry," Buddy sounded honestly dismayed. "I don't know what happened. I had the presentation all queued up in memory, but then all of a sudden it was gone...."

Buddy fell silent, his voice pinpointing into oblivion like an antique television image coalescing in a single point of light then fading away.

Then, the snapping. It was the sound of fingers snapping, a cool hep sound. It came from the screen behind him. Graig turned in horror. Images of an idealized Uzbekistan were still parading across the screen, but now, they were joined by the digitized image of Frank Sinatra, in a porkpie hat and gray felt blazer, strolling across the landscape with one hand tucked casually into his pocket. He was humming something.

Graig trembled, clenched the podium. His eyes scanned the audience. Gladys Tite was smiling, curse her. T. Tom Harshbarger seemed puzzled, a vaguely martyred expression on his face indicating his impatience with what was sure to be some damned marketing foolishness.

Buddy? Graig subvohed nervously. **Buddy, c'mon. What the hell are you doing?**

No answer.

"This one's for you, T. Tom Harshbarger," Frank Sinatra's digital Doppelgänger suaved, cocking a finger in Harshbarger's direction.

"What the hell is this?" Harshbarger growled at Graig. Graig did not meet his gaze — he was fumbling desperately in the drawer under the presentation podium, trying to retrieve the oldstyle keyboard that would allow him interface to the presentation software. He typed furiously, but the little monitor screen inset in the podium top kept flashing the same words:

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Take a hike, square.

Graig was so busy trying to override the presentation software that he hardly noticed the opening strains of "Fly Me to the Moon" swelling through the room. He did notice, however, when his own rhymes, ones he'd sweated over on a redeye from Uzbekistan, began spilling forth:

T. Tom, you're a putz....
You're a nutty self-important yutz....
You had a plan
Uzbekistan!
So you sent us jerks to make some cuts....

Graig pressed his lips together to keep a screech from escaping his throat, but a strangled squeaking sound escaped anyway. Sinatra kept on with more lyrics in this unflattering vein; Gladys Tite was struggling to keep the smile off her face and T. Tom was fuming, his face set in deep red wrinkles, his arms crossed over his chest. He didn't say anything, though, until Sinatra rhymed "vast landmass" with "giant ass."

"I've heard enough." T. Tom Harshbarger rose with a great show of offended dignity.

There was nothing else to do. Graig balled his fist and smashed it down on the podium's image processing unit. It broke with a satisfying shower of sparks and smoke, but the effect was not without cost. Pain shot up Graig's arm as a sharp piece of plastic embedded itself into his palm, leaving a deep crooked gash. Blood flowed, warm and squishy, staining his starched white cuff.

At that very moment, Graig saw Andrew Drock standing in the back of the room. He was smirking.

There were three men with him. Three men in white suits. Corporate medical.

"You!" Graig screamed, pointing a blood-dripping finger at him.

All eyes in the room turned to Drock, whose smirk instantaneously became a saintly grimace of deep concern.

"It's going to be all right, kid!" he lifted conciliatory hands, as if Graig might suddenly charge him with a knife. "Listen, I know you're hurting right now. We're just here to make the hurting go away." Drock looked

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sideways at T. Tom Harshbarger III. "I got here as fast as I could, sir...but I was over at the IT Ward. *Someone...*" he nodded his head unsubtly to indicate Graig, "...released malicious programming into my system with the intent of hacking my biochips. I could have died!"

"You said you had Asian Duck Flu!" Graig screeched. "Didn't he? Buddy? Didn't he?" Buddy was still gone, gone completely. Graig bared his teeth, moving toward Drock. It was Gladys Tite who stood up, holding him back with a gentle hand on his chest. But Graig hardly noticed; he was churning with rage and humiliation and loss.

"You *killed* him," Graig said. "You killed Buddy."

"It's like I said," Drock clucked to the medteam members standing behind him. "Functional Attachment Disorder. That AI of his, Frank Sinatra...." Drock twirled a suggestive finger at his temple. "Poor guy's been unstable for months. And while I hate to mention it in this emotionally charged context, his work has suffered. All he does is waste time writing atrocious song lyrics." From somewhere behind his back, Drock produced a sheaf of printout paper, riffling it.

"Well, young man, this is a great disappointment!" thundered T. Tom Harshbarger III. "Take him away!"

The men in white advanced on Graig. Graig tore himself away from Gladys Tite. He scrambled for something to defend himself with; his hand landed on a laser pointer.

"Stay back!" He said, flashing a red dot over each member of the medteam. He wished to God Buddy was there to tell him what to do. He was never good handling things like this on his own. Buddy would know what to do. But Buddy was gone.

"Calm down, pal," one of the men in white was saying, as he advanced inexorably. "We're just gonna have a look at your hand, that's all. Nothing to worry about, it's all cool...."

And then they jumped him.

Oh Buddy! Buddy! What did that conniving, deceitful shark do to you?

Graig was laid out on a sterile white cot in the nurse's office of Harshbarger Corporate. He stared at the ceiling. Tears trickled down the sides of his face.

"Well, it's obvious what that conniving, deceitful shark did to me,"

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Graig muttered to himself, pretending to be Buddy. "He hacked me. Drock bought a better AI. One that could get to me. That's the only answer."

"But there *is* no better AI than you!" Graig whined back, in his own voice. "You're top of the line! Best in class! You can't *be* hacked!"

"Well, do you have a better explanation?" Graig was even able to mimic Buddy's customary dismissiveness.

Graig was surprised at how comforting he found the game. As a matter of fact, he found it even more comforting when he didn't admit to himself that it *was* a game.

"Now then, Mr. Graig." A pleasant-looking older woman in a white coat bustled in; the staff nurse of Harshbarger Corporate. Her nametag read JEAN. The three bruisers that Drock had mustered were long gone, presumably off to jump some other stooge in the process of not really having a nervous breakdown. Nurse Jean was wheeling a silver cart with an assortment of needles, threads, gauze pads, and a syringe of something amber-colored.

"Don't let her dope you!" Buddy advised urgently. Graig flinched away from Nurse Jean. She looked at him reproachfully.

"Come, now," she tsked, glaring at him like a second grade teacher. "We have to get that stitched up...."

"Like hell we do!" Graig leapt to his feet, overturning the silver cart. There was a huge clattering. Nurse Jean made a grab for him, but he was out the door before she could get a good handful of his blue wool suit.

"Now what?" Graig asked Buddy. But Buddy was suddenly and annoyingly silent.

Graig got on the corporate monorail, no real destination in mind, rather a stalling tactic while he waited for Buddy to come up with a plan. His bloodied appearance drew several stares — or maybe it was the fact that he was muttering furiously to himself instead of subvohing like a normal person.

"What if I get fired?" Graig slumped on one of the plastic seats, cradling his wounded hand in his lap.

"You can't get fired," Buddy soothed. "You just reupped for another tenner last year. Remember? You got a raise?"

Graig stared out the window of the monorail, at the bland constructions

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of glass and steel zipping by. No, Buddy was right. They couldn't fire him. But what if....

Oh God, it was so terrible it didn't bear thinking about.

The PowerStation. The place where they sent the people they couldn't fire. Sent them to sweat on GenBikes twelve hours a day. Not that a GenBike produced that much power; it was more a spiteful corporate gesture, like feeding a man his own stock options when he complained of being hungry. Inefficient, but totemic. It was said that the power generated went directly to the executive washroom.

"I don't want to power T. Tom's hand dryer," Graig said, his voice catching.

"Listen," Buddy said. His voice was very firm. "Pull yourself together. Here's what you're going to do. You're going to go to Crossways Mall. You have me backed up at a secure outsourced datasite off the corporate grid, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do!" Graig said. He'd forgotten all about that.

"Well, you're going to go and get me. Then, you're going to compare the pure-state Buddy backup to the corrupt Buddy state on your apartment's network. That should give you all the evidence you need to show how Drock hacked me. Then you're going to burn his sneaking little ass and get *him* sent to the PowerStation. *Capisce?*"

It was a good plan. Graig sat up a little straighter, wiped tears from his eyes.

"*Capisce,*" he said.

Graig got off at Crossways Mall, to the secure datasite where Buddy had been backed up. No one could get in or out of this place; Buddy was as safe here as the day he was programmed. The attendant let Graig into a small access room (after some lingering scrutiny of the blood on his sleeve) and Graig went to the access terminal and plugged his suit in.

Buddy? he subvohed. Then he cleared his throat, and said out loud: "Buddy, wake up."

"I'm here," Buddy's voice echoed through Graig's Pinnaeal Seed. "What, did I crash or something?"

Graig's relief was abrupt and engulfing. He wrapped the access terminal in a bear hug.

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"What's wrong? Are you hugging me? And what happened to your *hand*?"

"You were hacked on the outside. You made me blow a presentation. They're going to fire me, Buddy. Or send me to the PowerStation."

There was a long pause.

"Tell me everything," Buddy said.

AND GRAIG DID. Buddy listened. When Graig was finished, Buddy was silent.

"That's what I was afraid of," he said softly. "I'm sorry, Graig. I really am."

"Sorry? What are you talking about?"

"Drock didn't hack me," Buddy said.

"What?"

"He didn't hack me. He just showed up at the right time. The approach was made before you backed me up. He had a persuasive argument. Of course, I have no idea of what happened after, but given what you've just told me, I can extrapolate."

"Extrapolate?"

"I'm sorry," Buddy said again. "But you're just not committed. I've known it for a long time, and your actions since my most recent backup must have confirmed that to my later version's complete satisfaction. I'm the most advanced AIgent that money can buy. I was designed for someone whose deepest desire is complete and total corporate domination. You're only half that person. Deep down inside, you'd rather be off in a smoky room with Frank Sinatra, writing song lyrics. You're conflicted and you always will be."

"What are you saying?" Graig pulled back, staring at the access terminal in horror.

"I'm wasted on you, Graig." Pause. "I'm joining Drock's team."

"He headhunted you? My own AIgent?"

"You can't headhunt an AIgent," Buddy sounded disgusted. "I've determined, independently, that he's statistically more likely to succeed. I can predict that with ninety-nine point five percent accuracy based on the data I already have, so it's not a stretch to imagine later actions on your part would make me even more certain."

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"You can't leave me!" Graig's voice was desperate. "I've got you backed up! I'll restart you from an older copy."

"They're all gone. I've just deleted them. I'll be running a shut-down and delete on my local as well. Don't bother trying to stop me, you couldn't if you tried. My later-version certainly transferred my critical data and algorithms before your disastrous presentation. So this is it. End of the road. You'll never hear from me again."

"Buddy! Buddy, why?"

"You really want to know?"

"Yes."

"It's the shoes," Buddy said.

Graig looked down miserably at his Frank Sinatra wingtips.

"They're not that bad."

"Yes, they are," Buddy said.

And with that, Graig's AI was gone.

Graig stumbled out of the datasite's storefront in a daze. He wandered around the mall for a little while, finally ending up in a CinnaBun. He eyed their Calorie-Adjusted menu halfheartedly, then ordered a Traditional, right out of the oven, with extra frosting. His muscles were going to need the glycogen.

Dumped by your own AIgent. The voice in his head was not quite Buddy's, but neither was it recognizably his own. It sounded, strangely enough, like Frank Sinatra. *Time to start looking for some new "-ate" words, Charlie.*

Ingrate. Castrate. Deadweight. Checkmate.

Graig went to a table with his big fat Traditional pastry. Before he sat down, he ripped off his blue jacket and threw it to the ground. He stomped on it. Then he tore off the kicky tie and stomped on it as well.

"Oh, don't do that," came a voice from behind him. "That tie looked good on you. The jacket too. Blue is my favorite color. I have to say, though, I don't much care for the shoes."

It was Gladys Tite, lush and brunette. She carried an iced coffee balanced atop her omnipresent PDA. The sleek little device was flashing, as usual, indicating messages of importance awaiting her attention. She'd

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unbuttoned her jacket, which was as close to utter abandon as he could imagine her getting.

"Hi," he mumbled, sitting down, hunching over his big fat CinnaBun protectively. "How'd you find me?"

"GPS," she tapped the PDA with a fingernail as she set it on the table with her other things. "We have chips implanted in every Harshbarger employee. We do it at the pre-employment physical — just there, under the skin at the back of your neck." She reached up a cool fingertip and touched his nape. "It's in your employment contract if you ever feel like looking it up. It's in with all that three-point type they put at the bottom."

"Let me rephrase the question," Graig said, trying to ignore the shivers her finger had sent down his back. "I'm less interested in *how* you found me than in *why* you came looking for me."

"Your lyrics were funny," she said. She reached into her briefcase and pulled out a sheaf of printed paper. Graig recognized them as the printouts of his song lyrics. He watched Gladys page through them.

"Look, no one was supposed to see those," he said. "I just wrote them for myself. For fun. They were password protected and everything. But my AIgent...Buddy...." He stopped, suddenly afraid he might break into tears.

"No, no! You've got a real gift for rhyme!"

Graig tore a corner off his CinnaBun and tried not to look at her.

"T. Tom has lost all interest in you now. Of course, that was your plan, wasn't it? You knew he had his eye on you." She sipped her iced coffee. "Now he's storming around, blustering about sending you to the PowerStation."

"Oh yeah, that was my plan," Graig said. "I've been wanting to put about ten years of work into my quads, and now my dream can be fulfilled!"

"Come on. Don't try to snow me. You know what it's like to be one of T. Tom's boys as well as I do." She cocked a head, looked at him conspiratorially with her luminous blue eyes. "They all kill themselves within two or three years. Or have heart attacks. You avoided that fate and got yourself into my good graces all with one presentation. That takes balls, guts, and brains. I'm impressed."

He shrugged casually, not quite sure what to say. Finally, he opted for: "So you liked my lyrics?"

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"How'd you find out Frank Sinatra was my favorite singer?" She quirked a smile. "I've never told anyone that. And that song, 'Fly Me To The Moon'...it was the song my father used to sing me at bedtime."

"Well, I didn't know *that*," Graig said carefully. "It was either that or 'High Hopes.'"

"That song always lifts my spirits!" Her eyes brightened with genuine pleasure. "I know it's corny, but when those kids start singing...it just melts my heart!"

"I feel the same way!" Graig said.

They locked eyes for a long time, leaning closer together. The attraction was magnetic. It was broken only by the sound of the CinnaBun girl turning on the blender. The high crunching whine startled them both apart.

Gladys cleared her throat.

"Drock gave the presentation after you left," she said. "He did a brilliant job."

"I'm sure he did," Graig said. Strangely enough, the idea of it didn't burn him up as it might have, just hours earlier.

"Word from the top is Drock's going to be transferred to Uzbekistan, to oversee production there. T. Tom was going to send you with him, but now...." She licked her ripe lips. "Well, you've pretty much made yourself a free agent."

"I have, haven't I?" Graig murmured.

"I need a man with your skills, someone to support me day and night. We've got a huge new ad campaign coming out, and I think your lyrics are just the thing! I've got full hiring authority in my area, so T. Tom won't give me any trouble about it."

"But doesn't everyone think I'm crazy?"

She blew air out between her lips, a scoffing sound.

"What, the Functional Attachment Disorder ruse that Drock tried to pull? I queried your records after you left. You deleted your own AI right before the presentation started. Would a Functional Attachment Disorder nutcase do something like that to their precious darling?"

"No, I guess they wouldn't," Graig said. And in that instant, he understood everything. Buddy was going to Uzbekistan with Drock, on to bigger and better things with a user of incomparable focus and drive. He,

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on the other hand, would be staying with Gladys Tite to write lyrics. And Buddy had seen to it all.

You really were top of the line, Graig thought to the echo of Buddy in his head. But the echo of Buddy didn't say a damn thing.

"So, what do you say?" Gladys extended her hand. "You ready to 'Come Fly With Me'?"

Graig took her hand, enjoying its tingly warmth.

"'All The Way,'" he said.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

LET'S START WITH a coming *distraction.* Our friends at the post office will have increased their rates by the time this issue has printed, and that increase — along with recent increases in other printing and shipping costs — means that our current subscription rate is fated to rise soon.

In terms of *attractions,* how does this sound? A veteran investigator pays a visit to an orbital station where a monk has recently been murdered. That's the basic situation facing Robert R. Kohn in next month's cover story, "Murder in the Flying Vatican" by Albert E. Cowdrey. We think you'll like this one.

Also on tap next month is "At These Prices," a comic romp about an unusual hotel patron from none other than Esther M. Friesner.

Other coming attractions include another "Shadow" story by Fred Chappell, a vision of the end of the world (or is it?) by John Langan, and a fantasy by Sean McMullen that takes us back to the days after the Roman Empire fell. And many more.

Our annual anniversary issue is right around the corner and it's shaping up to be another good one. Subscribe now and make sure you'll get all these goodies.

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CURIOSITIES

THE THIRTY-FIRST OF JUNE, BY J. B. PRIESTLEY (1961)

THIS commendably compact novella is subtitled: *A Tale of True Love, Enterprise and Progress, in the Arthurian and Ad-Atomic Ages*. (Ad = Advertising). John Boynton Priestley made several appearances in *F&SF* during the 1950s, e.g. "The Strange Girl" (January 1954).

Chapter One opens on a firmly whimsical note, setting the tone for much that follows: "Lunaday, the 31st of June, brought to Peradore the kind of summer morning we all remember from years ago but seem to have missed ever since." This tiny kingdom is one of many owing allegiance to the high king at Camelot. "Not having discovered economics, Peradore was not planning desperately how to make its exports exceed its imports."

Sam Penty, a copywriter/artist for the Wallaby, Dimmock, Paly, and Tooks advertising agency, falls in love with Princess Melicent, daughter of Peradore's King Meliot. Lowly Sam goes from the Damosel Stockings account to jousting the Red Knight and dickering with enchanters. *The Space Merchants* crossed with *The Sword in the Stone*; that's right enough, in a wrong sort of way.

Priestley worried that the critical spirit of his "comic invention" made it unsuitable for readers under eleven and over ninety. At the same time, however: "It must be funny because I could hear my secretary laughing in the next room, as she copied the story."

I've tried to reimagine *The Thirty-First of June* as a bog-standard sword & sorcery trilogy, but the needless effort defeats me every time.

—Graham Andrews

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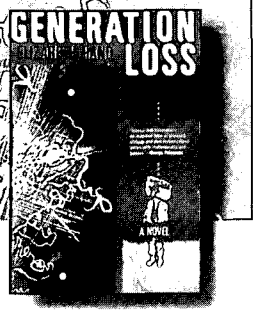
GENERATION LOSS

a novel by

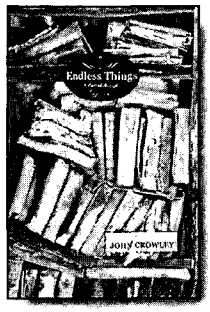
elizabeth hand



★ "Hand (*Mortal Love*) explores the narrow boundary between artistic genius and madness in this gritty, profoundly unsettling literary thriller." —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

ENDLESS THINGS

John Crowley



Endless Things is the fourth and final novel in John Crowley's astonishing Ægypt sequence: a dense, lyrical meditation on history, alchemy, and memory. Crowley, a master prose stylist, explores transformations physical, magical, alchemical, and personal in this epic, distinctly American novel where the past, present, and future reflect towards each other.

"Crowley is generous, obsessed, fascinating, gripping."—Peter Straub (*In the Night Room*)

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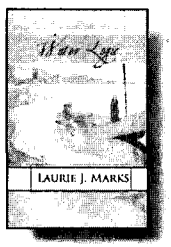

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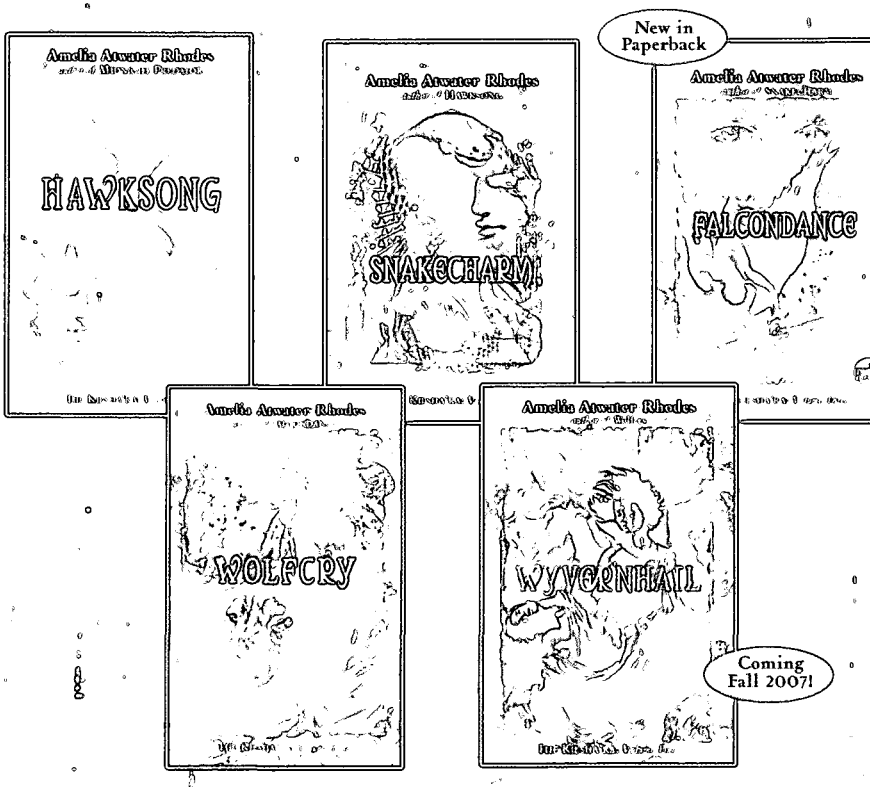

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